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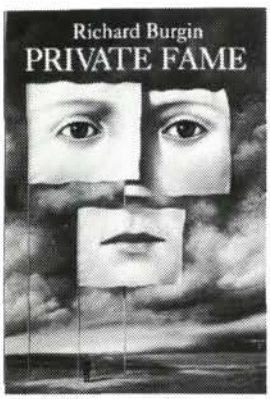

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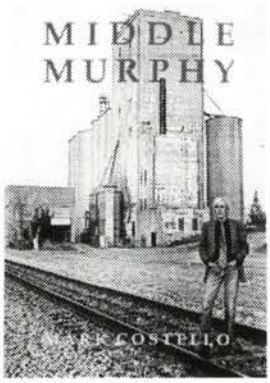

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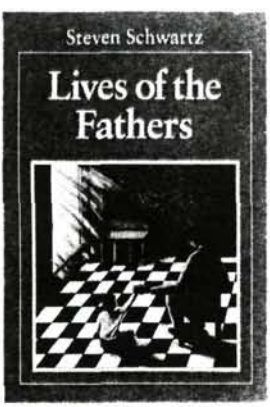

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The Hudson Review

A magazine of literature and the arts

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TO OUR READERS

New books by Contributing Editors of THE HUDSON REVIEW have recently been published. In accordance with our policy, the books will not be reviewed in these pages, but are listed below for the interest of our readers:

MARCIA B. SIEGEL: *The Tail of the Dragon: New Dance, 1976–1982.* Duke University Press. $39.95; $14.95.

BERT CARDULLO: *What Is Neorealism?* University Press of America. $29.50.

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Unsolicited mss will be read according to the following schedule: *Nonfiction*: January 1 through March 31, and October 1 through December 31; *Poetry*: April 1 through September 30; *Fiction*: June 1 through November 30. Unsolicited mss received at other times will be returned unread. Manuscripts submitted by subscribers who so identify themselves will be read throughout the year. Manuscripts will not be returned nor will inquiries be answered unless accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes. No responsibility is assumed for their loss or injury.

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Comment:

Letter from Galway

DEAR H,

Thirty-five years ago when I first came under the spell of poetry, Yeats was my introduction to Ireland. More truly, Yeats *was* my Ireland. It follows that my Ireland was a land of myth—austere, medieval and aristocratic:

> Now that we're almost settled in our house
> I'll name the friends that cannot sup with us
> Beside a fire of turf in th'ancient tower,
> And having talked to some late hour
> Climb up the narrow winding stairs to bed.

This poem, "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," elegized a man who seemed larger than life. The place names in Yeats's poems memorialized places I, a boy in Tennessee, reading books from the public library, had never heard of: "cold Clare rock, Galway rock and thorn." Yeats handled place names with an authority that made me feel not only that these places were significant, but that everyone must know about them except me. In "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death," Robert Gregory is made to say, "My country is Kiltartan Cross, / My countrymen Kiltartan's poor." Surely these people in Kiltartan, poor though they may have been, were important people. Through such inspired myth-making Yeats put the West of Ireland on the map for me.

When the Amy Lowell travel grant presented me with the enviable choice of being able to take my family anywhere in the world to live for a year, I chose a village in the West of Ireland: Kinvara, in the southern part of County Galway, just over the line from County Clare, twelve miles from Yeats's Thoor Ballylee. Not that I wanted to go on a Yeatsian pilgrimage. But in a not easily definable way, Yeats's poetry still lodges somewhere near the center of my understanding of Ireland.

Standing on the quay at Kinvara facing north in the direction of Galway City, eighteen miles away, I look out toward the sixteenth-century Dun Guaire Castle, which the more architecturally sophisticated think of not as a castle but as a "tower house," as Thoor Ballylee is, of the late-Medieval type which can be seen in varying degrees of ruination over the entire West and Southwest of Ireland. Built for

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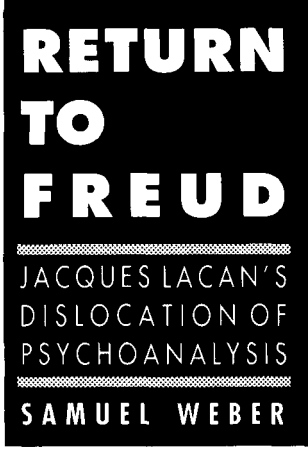

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wealthy landowners, tower houses were fortified residences three to six storeys high, which provided a superior command of the surrounding countryside and—with their battlements, lancet windows, and machicolations from which one could shoot, drop or pour things on attackers—a strong defensive position in troubled times. Their presence is a reminder of Ireland's feudal past, and of the unsettled conditions that prevailed until much later here than in most other European countries. Yeats liked to imagine the Celtic and Anglo-Norman soldier-adventurers who built these towers: "Rough men-at-arms, cross-gartered to the knees / Or shod in iron, climbed the narrow stairs." Dun Guaire was restored by Yeats's friend, the novelist Oliver St. John Gogarty, with Yeats himself designing the restored archway through which one enters the castle courtyard.

Kinvara quay was built in the eighteenth century, an era when sea roads were faster and more reliable than land roads, which were dusty and muddy by season, and according to Daniel Corkery's classic, *The Hidden Ireland*, "vast crowds of beggars, many of them blind, swarmed upon them," along with "pedlars, packmen, horses laden with goods, wagons, carriages, coaches—and occasionally highway men." The sturdy sailing ships called Galway Hookers tied up at the quay—enlarged, incidentally, in 1807 by the Gregorys of Coole—to unload turf from Connemara, which was burned for fuel, and then, presumably after the sailors had sampled Kinvara's busy pub life, sailed back to that stony, boggy country northwest of here, loaded with produce from the fertile farmland surrounding Kinvara. If I walk out the front door of the early nineteenth-century house where we are living, with its tiny walled garden, and go a hundred yards up the Gort Road toward Coole Park, I can look down over the village and see how the bounty of the farms, the root crops, the meat and milk of the pastures, seem poised, economically and geographically, to be carted downhill to Kinvara quay. Things must have gone this way for centuries.

References to Kinvara reach back to the age of legend that predates the pages of recorded history. One chronicler tells us that the legendary general Fin Mac Cumhail "defeated the chieftain Uinche in a battle at Ceann Mara [Irish, "head of the sea"] now known as Kinvara, on the Bay of Galway." Rory O'Shaugnessy, who built Dun Guaire Castle in 1540, used stones from an earlier fortress that belonged to Guaire, King of Connacht, in the seventh century, traces of which remain on a promontory to the east of Dun Guaire. Reminders such as these of how ancient Celtic civilization is put a strange spin on one's sense of time. While nineteenth-century buildings at home are "old," here they seem "new."

A vestige of Ireland's more recent past is Seamount, the convent school that looms over the village from its hill above the Galway Road, which is also Kinvara's main street, curving through the village south into Clare—the house's eminence bolstered by a stone retaining wall containing blocks of limestone so huge one wonders how they could

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have been lifted into place. Until 1921 when it was willed to the Sisters of Mercy, Seamount was one of the famous (or infamous, depending on your point of view) Big Houses, part of the social and economic structure of landowner and tenant that dominated Irish life right up to the twentieth century. At dawn and dusk one hears the raucous cawing of rooks that nest in the convent beeches, along with the high-pitched cries of seagulls that glide in off the Atlantic. These birds give the village its characteristic sound. Kinvara has its characteristic fragrances as well: briny sea-air, salt-stung and rain-washed, with at all hours a whiff of turf smoke, that peaty aroma evocative of single-malt whiskey and the boglands from which the turf is dug.

The village is defined architecturally by its two- and three-storey limestone, semi-detached houses, erected in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, faced with plaster in most cases and painted sky blue, lemon, chartreuse, in accordance with the traditional Irish love of dramatic colors, which more recently have given way to sedate hues like eggshell, white, and oyster. Whatever their color these buildings are a triumph of vernacular architecture and sound aesthetic values. Their reassuring bulks rise unhurriedly from strong foundations which are "battered" (sloped outward slightly at the base) so as to support their weight, up to the dignified pitch of their slate roofs, topped with Dickensian chimney pots where crows nest, rivalling the rooks with their throaty chatter.

The merchants, corn factors, and publicans who had these splendid edifices built seem to me subconsciously to have been making a statement about how the land confronts the unpredictability of the sea here. No force off the Atlantic, one feels, could threaten their angles or budge their masses. Their solidity, based on the security of agriculture and trade, asserts itself as well in the face of the ruins that are everywhere to be seen across the Irish countryside: skeletons of medieval churches and abbeys, castles and tower houses, farm cottages abandoned during the Famine or as recently as the past decade, when the owners migrated to London, Boston or Sydney, the cottages' thatched roofs collapsing under the relentless Irish weather.

Immured in the heart of Kinvara, its existence unguessed at by most visitors, invisible except for one ivy-covered gable which can be seen from a corner of the quay, is another example of how modern Ireland is built on the ruins, and in this case literally on the bones, of her past. Last week after a few pints of Guinness at the Ould Plaid Shawl, the historian Jeff O'Connell and I decided to have a look round St. Coman's Church and the graveyard that surrounds it. In one form or another a church has stood on this spot for approximately a millennium and a half. Two desperadoes, the O'Curry brothers, pillaged and burned St. Coman's in about 540 A.D. Guilt-stricken, they later had a change of heart and rebuilt the church, which was then modified in the Hiberno-Romanesque style in the twelfth century, with features added in the fifteenth and eighteenth

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centuries. Through famine and emigration Kinvara's population was cut in half during the twenty-year period leading up to 1870, and in that decade St. Coman's was abandoned in favor of a newer church. Houses were built around the churchyard, gradually cutting off access to it.

As recently as a hundred years ago Monsignor Fahey, historian of the diocese, wrote that "The ruined church . . . still flings its shadow on the 'dark blue tide' [a phrase from an old poem about Kinvara] from the lofty eminence within the town which it crowns." Some ten years ago when water mains were being repaired along the main street, workers dug up a huge quantity of bones, which were carted away and buried elsewhere. The street and the houses fronting it had been dug right into the side of the ancient burial ground. Jeff and I, guided by two of the publican's boys, Patrick and Noel, made our way through the old stables behind the pub, through bramble thickets and the indiscriminate piles of refuse that find their way into back yards, around the stone walls of the church, and into the church through the Romanesque south doorway, a beautiful round arch piled two feet above ground level with earth and discarded building materials. A fine fifteenth-century window had been jammed with roofing paper and rubbish. We scraped the mud off two broken slabs to look at the medieval crosses chiseled into their surface. Who knows how many treasures like St. Coman's there are hidden away in forgotten corners of Ireland?

Kinvara's claim to fame as far as most people are concerned, however, is not its architectural history and antiquarian associations, but rather its pubs. A village population of roughly 500 contrives, with stout contributions from the residents of outlying areas, to support a total of nine pubs including the Ould Plaid Shawl. Irish people don't seem to enjoy drinking at home. Drinking means drinking at the pub. And like everything else in Ireland, drinking at the pub involves conversation. Anyone not willing to slow down for a few minutes and pass the time of day is considered to be seriously lacking in common courtesy. You don't so much as buy a postage stamp in Ireland without prefacing the transaction with a few remarks, preferably humorous. Ireland is one vast conversation in the shape of an island.

Well equipped as it is with pubs, Kinvara is a major center for traditional Irish music. It is a rare Saturday night when my wife Mary and I are not in the pub at Winkle's Hotel, where some of the best-known musicians in Ireland perform. Traditional music largely means instrumental music. When a song is to be sung, the musicians and the pub owner call for silence, and the song is "given" unaccompanied. The faster tunes—and most of these tunes run fast—are categorized according to what sort of dance step they would accompany: reel, jig, and hornpipe predominate. The slow tunes are called airs. Instrumentation normally consists of fiddle, accordion, and

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sometimes concertina, wooden flute, tin whistle, guitar, sometimes piano. Tight ensemble playing is the mark of this music at its best, and it swings. To the uninitiated ear the tunes at first tend to sound alike. As the ear becomes more finely tuned, the subtle variations, the emotional shadings, and the virtuosity of individual performers reveal themselves.

As with jazz, traditional music is enhanced by the setting in which one listens to it: a smoky, crowded pub where one arrives usually no earlier than ten o'clock, sits at the bar with a pint of porter or a glass of Bushmill's at the ready, and stays till the wee hours. Official pub closing times are eleven in winter, half past eleven in summer—and this is about when the session starts to get rolling. The peculiarity of Irish licensing laws means that though the pub closes its doors to newcomers at about 11:30, those patrons inside may continue to be served drinks for as long as the management pleases. This practice may not be strictly legal, but in Ireland a fine disregard for the petty details of the law is traditional—dating, one would suppose, from the days of British rule. Recently Mary and I found ourselves coming home from a session at Winkle's at six in the morning—and the music was still going. As Somerville and Ross remark in *The Big House of Inver*, "People get to bed late, and sleep late, in the listless Western villages."

Though, as I have said, the music moves along at a sprightly pace, it is not really authentic unless touched with melancholy, the famous "sadness of the Gael." A genuine survival of the ancient Celtic culture, this music expresses the Irish people's endurance in the face of centuries of poverty, military occupation, eviction from the land, systematic attempts to eradicate the native religion, and finally, the sadness associated with the emigration which has been a feature of Irish life since the "Flight of the Earls" following their defeat by the English in the first decade of the seventeenth century. Perhaps the sadness one hears in traditional music based on dance tunes finds its counterpart in Yeats's "Lapis Lazuli," where survivors of tragedy endure it with the defiant insouciance displayed by these ancient Chinese sages:

> One asks for mournful melodies;
> Accomplished fingers begin to play.
> Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
> Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.

From "Lapis Lazuli" and its ancient Chinese sages to the town of Gort, which according to Thackeray "looked as if it wondered how the deuce it got itself in the midst of such desolate country, and seemed to *bore* itself there considerably," might seem a great distance indeed. My oldest son goes to school in Gort, which is a gritty little market town on the main street of which may be seen Burke's welding shop.

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Burke's sports a tasteful plaque quoting Yeats's poem "To Be Carved on a Stone at Thoor Ballylee":

> I, the poet William Yeats,
> With old millboards and sea-green slates,
> And smithy work from the Gort forge
> Restored this tower for my wife George.
> And may these characters remain
> When all is ruin once again.

Burke's did the blacksmith work for the restoration at Thoor Ballylee. Thus does the building trade intersect the life of the imagination.

I trust no reader of *The Hudson Review* will contact the Irish authorities when I confess that, following local custom, I poached my Christmas tree from the grounds of Coole Park. The woods at Coole are extensive. It is a great shame that Coole House, perhaps the most important *locus* from Ireland's literary history except for Yeats's tower itself, was torn down in 1941 and the stones carted off by local farmers. According to tradition the Gregorys were good landlords, not evicting tenants, not exacting rents from those who could not afford to pay. Sir William Gregory's father is said to have died from a fever he contracted while nursing a sick tenant back to health. That some members of the Anglo-Irish gentry connived to alleviate the evils of a system whereby English settlers over the course of several centuries took the land away from the Irish and then in turn rented it back to them, is laudable; Edmund Burke's comment, though, cuts to the heart of the matter: "Connivance is the relaxation of slavery, not the definition of liberty."

The other day Jeff O'Connell and I drove over to Gort to have a chat with Gerry Keane, an old gentleman who owns a grocery and dry goods store where the Yeatses used to buy their provisions. We had a drink in the pub that, following the pattern of old-fashioned Irish shops, is situated at the back of the establishment. Mr. Keane, a sprightly old man though practically blind, wearing a red bow tie, remembers Yeats and Lady Gregory well. She was a Persse, and the Persses had the reputation of being Protestant proselytizers. The gifts of tobacco she would take to the county workhouse, where she collected Irish folktales, were said to have been wrapped in religious tracts. The handsome mahogany desk in Mr. Keane's office had belonged to Lady Gregory. A pencil drawing by her son Robert hung on the wall, and three antique swords that had belonged to Sir William Gregory hung above the bar. The desk and the swords were magnificent, the drawing somewhat less so.

Mr. Keane remembers Yeats, wearing a wide-brimmed black hat, *pince-nez*, and the flowing bow tie familiar from pictures of the poet, waiting out in the chaise "dreaming" while his wife went in to do the

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shopping. He had little time, Mr. Keane said with a little smile, to spare on such folk as the local merchants, folk who "fumbled in a greasy till," he quoted. Yeats would also stand on the bridge in Gort on these expeditions into town, looking down at the water, which, the old man said, "was a living thing to him." When a local workman, irked because he could never get Yeats to speak to him, was hired to install a lock at Thoor Ballylee, the man deliberately installed the lock upside down. "Then," Mr. Keane said, "Yeats had plenty to say to him."

Leaving Mr. Keane's shop, we drove north from Gort and took the turnoff past Kiltartan crossroads to the tower. Thoor Ballylee, built right on the edge of the stream that runs past it, at the far end of a stone bridge, gives an immediate impression of monolithic strength. It is compact and assertive, with none of the fanciful medievalism I had imagined when I first read Yeats's tower poems. A thatched cottage facing the road that crosses the bridge abuts the tower, sheltering beneath its massiveness. "My idea," Yeats wrote in a letter, "is to keep the contrast between the medieval castle and the peasant's cottage." Following his principle expressed in *A Vision* of "striking through the mask" and becoming one's opposite through action, it is easy to see why Yeats the dreamer "founded here," as he says in his poem "My House,"where "A man-at-arms / Gathered a score of horse and spent his days."

Contemporary Irish literary opinion fidgets under the absoluteness of Yeats's achievement, and of all Irish sins, envy is the deadliest. But even the most jaded must grant that the old master brought together, both in his work and in this emblematic residence, a cluster of symbols exemplifying several of the most important strands of Irish culture. His emphasis on the tower's martial past honors the tumultuous and aristocratic Middle Ages, with perhaps a glance at the violence of the Civil War and a premonition of the continuing troubles in Northern Ireland. The cottage acknowledges Ireland's folk traditions of craft, song, and talk. Yeats's own affinities with "*Il Penseroso*'s Platonist" who "toiled on / In some like chamber," call to mind the austere traditions of the monastic scholar-poets of the past. Yeats's vision of the country no longer defines Ireland—the real place is of course more complex and absorbing than any one man's vision of it could encompass—but nothing I have encountered here has changed my view that in Yeats "the indomitable Irishry" found its noblest spokesman.

RICHARD TILLINGHAST

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LOUIS SIMPSON

The Vigil

1

Rosalind smiled when she saw us. She seems to be aware of what is happening, and can understand what you say if you speak in a loud voice. But she cannot speak, only utter sounds when she needs something or is in pain. She stopped talking some months ago and the vocal cords have deteriorated, as have the muscles of her arms and legs. She can neither move nor speak.

I said that everyone sent their love and Herbert had recovered completely. This was not exactly true: my brother had a heart attack; the doctor recommended surgery but he wouldn't have it—he said that he could cure himself with proper diet and exercise.

I told her that Miriam and I thought about her constantly and I had been writing about her . . . how, in Russia when she was a child, she stood outside the church where they were singing "Jesus Christ is risen." How she went up to the roof where her grandmother kept tomatoes and cucumbers and brought some down to share with the other children.

Later Miriam and I went for a walk on Viale Carducci. She said that it was good to talk to Rosalind in this way about the past.

I haven't told my mother everything I've written about her—some of the things I said wouldn't have pleased her at all. I never showed her the book in which I wrote about our life in Jamaica. My writing used to puzzle her and make her uneasy. She remarked of one poem, "Typhus," in which I wrote about the death of her sister Lisa, that I wrote about things that didn't make you feel happy.

Vincenza says that Rosalind's life is drawing to a close: she may not last beyond the New Year. Renato says, "La poverina

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. . . Rosalind è finita." What will he do when she's gone? His life has been bound up with hers for thirty-five years. It has been exhausting to take care of her, and at times he has been driven almost crazy with worry, but when she's no longer here his life will have no purpose.

She is never left unattended; she has a great fear of being left alone; her eyes follow you about the room. Though she cannot speak she seems to understand when Vincenza, speaking close to her ear in a low voice, asks, "Where does it hurt? Is it your leg? Your arm?" She tries to answer but only makes noises. But Vincenza understands and places ointment on a hand and massages it gently.

Vincenza is the trained nurse. In the morning when the housekeeper, Grazia, has given Rosalind her breakfast, Vincenza arrives. There is also a male nurse who gives Rosalind her bath and an enema if one is needed. At two in the afternoon Vincenza leaves and a young woman named Alessandra takes her place. She knows how to perform simple tasks: changing Rosalind's position in bed or on the chair, giving her medicine or something to drink. When Alessandra leaves, Grazia gives Rosalind her evening meal and stays in the room for an hour. Then another woman, Angela, arrives, and the male nurse returns to give Rosalind an injection so she can sleep. Angela stays with her through the night.

In the evening we ate at Montecatini—we shall be taking our meals out, except breakfast. Grazia has her hands full helping in the sickroom—she cannot cook besides.

The restaurant owner, a woman of large proportions, welcomed us back with a big smile and inquired after my mother. We were also greeted by the man who waited on our table last summer. He has white hair and an expression of sensitivity and patient suffering. But the *antipasti*, a specialty of the house, were not in evidence. On our previous visits there was a table of *antipasti*: marinated shrimps, potato puffs, marinated mushrooms, salmon, fried zucchini pancakes, *calamari* in oil and vinegar, white beans with scallions . . . twenty dishes to choose from, and these were only the first course, the *antipasti*!

The waiter said that there was no "movement," so it didn't pay to have the *antipasti*, they would only have to be thrown out.

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"No movement" gave us to understand that the failure of customers to appear was due to a physical law, not some fault of the restaurant.

The proprietor said that it was because of the World Cup—everyone was watching football on television. And this, she said, rolling her eyes to heaven, would continue until July the 8th.

The proprietor and the waiter commiserated with us on the performance of the American team against Czechoslovakia. The Czech team wasn't one of the best, yet the score was Czechoslovakia 5, U.S. 1. They wondered if America would ever take to football. I said I didn't think so: young people didn't grow up playing it. Tomorrow the Americans were playing Italy, one of the best teams in the tournament: the outcome didn't bear thinking of.

When we left the restaurant we saw that the proprietor had put up a sign, "Sala TV," hoping to attract customers.

We walked back on Viale Carducci. At the Piazza Mazzini a large TV screen had been erected and a crowd was watching the game. Argentina was ahead of Russia, 1-0, and the Russians were fouling like crazy, tripping the Argentinian forwards. A line of young Italians sitting on the curb in front of us were distressed every time the referee blew his whistle and gave the Argentinians a penalty kick. Fans of the Soviet Union. "What's there to like about Russia?" Miriam remarked.

Today is Thursday when there's an open-air market and people come from all directions to buy clothing, shoes, kitchen utensils, toys, meat and produce, at bargain prices. We walked around the market, then went to the beach and ate lunch at Lidino. We are regular customers and on friendly terms with the family: Valeria and her daughter Suzanna who wait on the tables; Flavio, Valeria's husband, who makes some of the dishes; Flavio's father, who sits and talks to people or reads the newspaper, and a grandmother who does most of the cooking. They are all concerned to know what is happening at the villa across the street.

Italians want to know about you . . . about your life. They don't understand how anyone can keep to himself. They don't understand surliness . . . people who look down at the ground and not around them. It doesn't matter how successful a man is

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if he doesn't seem to be enjoying life. The solitary person, the one without enjoyment, is an object of pity or contempt.

When I first came to Italy I understood none of this—I was unwilling to be pleased. That year I was working on my dissertation on a Scottish author . . . a subject as far removed from Italian life as possible. I was reading about people who kept sheep on the bare hills of Scotland in the wind and rain. Or else they were cutting one another's throats. I was studying the harsh doctrine of John Knox, the idea of predestination, the gloomy view of life that divided humankind into those who were saved from birth and marked for heaven, and those who were irrevocably damned. This made for an interesting idea that my author, James Hogg, had used to good effect. What if a man knew he was saved: couldn't he then do anything—lie, steal, fornicate, commit murder—and still be assured of his place in heaven?

With matters such as this on my mind I had little time for the life around me. Other Americans at the Academy on the hill above St. Peter's made forays into Rome and came back with reports of the wonders they had seen . . . some work of art or good, cheap restaurant. They dug up bits of pottery that were said to be Etruscan. But I sat typing in an apartment that had a marble floor, blowing on my fingers to warm them.

I disliked the religion that hung over the city like smog. I agreed with Dostoievsky: he said that the Romans were like people who lived by exhibiting the corpse of their grandmother. On the other hand they seemed frivolous and empty-headed. I looked dourly on their enjoyments.

If you really want to hate people you must hate them in their pleasures: the Englishman at cricket; the German drinking beer; the Italian promenading.

Since that time, with many visits to Italy, my idea of the Italians has changed. What I took to be frivolity I now see as a wish to offset poverty, illness, and old age. Not to mention volcanic eruptions, and the wars that sweep across the land, leaving ruins. In the face of these things, the young promenade with their arms around each other, and an old man and woman go by on a two-seater bicycle, pedaling with dignity.

The women who tend my mother's sickbed, Miriam says, are angels. Their patience is incredible; they go about their tasks

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with affection for the sufferer. Perhaps they really are angels: there couldn't be much difference between Grazia, Vincenza, Alessandra, Angela and the beings we see depicted in paintings who inhabit a higher sphere of existence. Perhaps there is no difference at all, and a Fra Angelico, a Giotto, are saying, "Look at the faces around you."

And the land is so beautiful! At the moment I'm sitting with Miriam on the back porch. On the porch itself there are flower pots with red roses, flowers the color of fuschia, whose name we don't know, and geraniums. Cherries are hanging a few feet away—the porch is level with the boughs. There is also a tree laden with apricots. In the garden below, white, rose-colored, blue, and lavender hydrangeas . . .

The houses nearby are painted white, yellow, or sand, with red tile roofs. Two apartment buildings overlook the villa and people can see us sitting here . . . as if anyone cared. In the distance there are umbrella pines and the foliage of the park with some trees that glitter like aspens. A large white cloud stands in a blue sky. But for the cloud the Apuan Alps would be visible, blue and jagged against the lighter blue of the sky.

Miriam is reading George Gissing's *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, and on the table in front of me lies Stephen Gill's life of Wordsworth. I can read only a few pages at a time—scholars write a language no one uses: "Perhaps Wordsworth even ploughed through the revised *Political Justice* and found it rebarbative."

I plan to review the book along with the life of Coleridge by Richard Holmes. I would like to show the difference between Wordsworth and Coleridge's approach to poetry as a spiritual endeavor and the way Americans go about it. In the United States poetry is a business like any other. Writing workshops produce a great deal of verse that is made to order—none of it really matters to anyone. This useless industry is presided over by teachers of "creative writing" and others who make a career out of reviewing books of poetry and awarding grants and prizes.

We read for a while then go upstairs and sit by my mother's bed. Vincenza has to give her a massage, so I go outside. Renato is sitting on a chair outside the door, as he often does.

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Sometimes he falls asleep in the chair. Grazia is also present. Renato asks me a question I have difficulty understanding, for he talks too fast. Grazia interprets: she has learned how to speak to Americans, slowly, for she has a sister who lives in the States and sometimes comes to visit.

Renato is asking if I think that Rosalind knows. I take him to mean, that she's dying. I say yes, I think she knows.

Renato says that he has no idea what Rosalind is thinking.

Grazia thinks that she doesn't know.

I say that Rosalind has fought hard all her life, and it's possible that she knows and still wants to live.

Renato wishes that she didn't want to live. There are times when she is in great pain.

I say, "Today?"

No, he says, not today.

These are the conversations you have when someone is dying.

Italy beat the U.S., 1-0. Miriam and I were having dinner at La Casina, the restaurant in the park, when the match began. We watched part of it on TV. The Italians scored a goal after a few minutes of play and we couldn't stand it—we left. But then we watched the rest of the match with Renato in his room. He's an expert on football—his brother Giorgio was a star player—and he is fed up with the Italians. They kept missing the goal, shooting over it or to the side. He stood up and made motions of banging his head on the wall.

After the match, cars went down Viale Carducci blowing their horns, but the Italians didn't have anything to feel proud of. They have been playing international football for years, the Americans are just getting started. In the second half the Americans seemed to be getting the hang of it and came close to evening the score.

At breakfast this morning Grazia gave us another reason that the local fans aren't elated. The match took place in Naples, and the fans in Viareggio don't like the Neapolitans. There have been "incidents," brawls, when people from Viareggio went to football matches in Naples. The people of Viareggio begrudge the Neapolitans the prestige of "hosting" a World Cup match.

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We are at Antaura, the *bagno* directly across the street from the villa. This part of the beach, with its bathhouse and umbrellas and chairs, is one of several bathing establishments that the Barsantis own. From here the villa looks rather comical, three stories topped with a square tower like a hat. It seems to be standing on tiptoe, peering out to sea.

You come to a place casually and have no liking for it . . . you may even dislike it. But time passes and one day you realize that much of your life has been spent there. Your connection with the place is like Swann's with Odette: "To think that I've wasted years of my life, that I've longed to die, that I've experienced my greatest love, for a woman who didn't appeal to me, who wasn't even my type!"

Well, not quite . . . I haven't wasted years of my life in Viareggio; it hasn't affected me so that I've wanted to die. But I've stayed here more times than I can remember, though at first glance the place didn't appeal to me.

What Swann doesn't seem to grasp is that it isn't Odette he became involved with so casually, but life. We are more at the mercy of accidents than we think we are. Hundreds of years ago people knew this very well—they wrote of Dame Fortuna with respect. But for the past two centuries, since making a god of Science, we have lived in the belief that we can control everything. And that is true: we can control everything, except our lives, and we are shocked when something happens that is out of our control.

I came to Viareggio because Rosalind and Renato had moved here. Before that they were living at San Alessio, a few minutes' drive from Lucca. Lucca was an ancient town with buildings as fine as any in Florence. There was a wall around the town that dated back to Roman times . . . so wide that there was a road on top of the wall on which cars could drive.

Rosalind and Renato bought and renovated a villa in San Alessio. The "Villa Rosalinda" with its surrounding acres was a showplace. The estate produced wine—Renato saw to this, he dealt with the *contadini*, the tenant farmers. That is, when he wasn't absent in Rome on some business to be done for his brother Benvenuto, "the Engineer," who lived in Venezuela. That was where the Engineer had made his fortune.

But Rosalind and Renato were growing old and they could

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no longer manage the estate. So they sold it and moved to Viareggio. The Villa Selene belonged to the Engineer, but he would let them use it. Some years ago Rosalind had picked it out and persuaded him to buy it and had furnished it for him.

Viareggio is just a resort town. People come here in the summer to use the beach. It isn't one of the fancy resorts but unashamedly middle-class, a family town. Once upon a time Viareggio had pretensions: cousins of royalty used to stay at the Hotel Principe di Piemonte or the Grand Hotel and Royal. But these days half the rooms are empty, or else they are filled with groups of tourists from Britain or Germany on economy tours.

The Viale Carducci, running parallel to the beach, holds nearly all of Viareggio that is worth seeing: shops that sell clothing, handbags, cigarette lighters, at fancy prices. There are dozens of hotels and pensiones. Halfway along the street is the square I've mentioned where people gather to watch football on a screen.

What else is there to say about Viareggio? They award a literary prize every year—the Viale Carducci is named after a poet, Giosuè Carducci, who flourished before the Great War and employed the sweeping oratory of the period. I think that by 1915 this must have been passing. "*Avanti, avanti, o sauro destrier, mio forte amico*!" "Forward, forward, O chestnut war-horse, my strong friend!" Not exactly the stuff to give the troops, huddled in mud and snow.

Every year there is a parade with floats, like the Macy's parade. Grazia's husband, beside working at Villa Selene as the cook and butler, used to manage the parade, a position of considerable importance. Oswaldo was a tall, handsome man, more like a Swede or Dane in appearance than an Italian. And one day, suddenly, he fell dead.

In the summer there's open-air opera at Torre del Lago, where Puccini used to live, a short distance from Viareggio. There's a statue to Puccini and to the cigarette . . . he is smoking one in a holder. You may visit his house and see his music sheets, his bed, and photographs of his mistresses.

For fifteen years I have been coming to Viareggio and am thoroughly familiar with the beach, the restaurants, the shops and cafés . . . a place that "isn't even my type."

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*

As I've said elsewhere, Rosina the cleaning woman is highly temperamental, more like a Neapolitan than a northern type. When anyone says anything she doesn't like, even Renato, she says "I'm going!" and starts taking off her apron.

This morning Vincenza gives us an account of Rosina's life, looking over her shoulder to be sure she doesn't hear. As a child Rosina was neglected. At fourteen she married a man who was "strange" . . . and a wife-beater. He struck her once so that she almost lost an eye. She had five miscarriages and gave birth twice, both girls. Five years ago her husband went off with another woman, leaving her with nothing but the clothes on her back and two children to care for.

For five years Rosina has worked so hard and saved so well that she owns a dress shop and two houses: the house in which she lives and another that she has given to her older daughter. When not in the shop she works as a cleaning woman. Besides her daughters there are two aged relatives of whom she is the sole support.

After a day's work she goes dancing . . . every night and often till two in the morning. She dances the tango, as in the time of Rudolph Valentino. Vincenza illustrates by clenching an imaginary rose between her teeth.

We hear Rosina going downstairs, every step resounding through the house. She is a small woman but the floor shakes as she walks.

Vincenza says that Rosina is fifty. Once she asked her how she was able to dance after working all day. Rosina said, "I only need two or three hours of sleep."

She once remarked, "What a *romanzo* [novel] my life would make!" Vincenza comments that it is *buffo*, a comedy.

I tell Vincenza that my mother's life, also, would make a novel. She says that when Rosalind was still able to speak she would talk about her childhood in Russia, the rats that ran across the floor. I say yes, that has always been her obsession. Once at Villa Rosalinda I came into a room and found her telling my son Tony, who was only six or seven, about rats. She was saying that there were rats in the attic and if he went up there they would eat him. I put a stop to that storytelling. In the

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grip of her obsession all that concerned her was to express it, without thinking of the effect it might have on a child. Or perhaps she wanted him to share her fear.

Rosalind lies with her eyes closed as we talk. They say that "the unexamined life" is not worth living. She wasn't given to examining her life—instead she has had a life full of adventure.

Rosina looks in for a moment. Miriam speaks to her about our dog Veronica who died last summer when we were here in Italy. At the time Rosina expressed sympathy. So now Miriam is telling her that we buried Veronica in our yard with a gravestone.

Rosina says, "I have a cat, and the cat makes . . ." She puts out her tongue and moves it up and down, at the same time stroking her face. "But," she says, "I had a husband for thirty years and . . ." She hits her right arm with her left hand in a gesture that says, "Get going!", and kicks out with her right foot. "I had a husband but I don't remember him, so I'm not going to remember a cat."

Later, on our walk into town, Miriam and I take turns trying to imitate Rosina's kick. It isn't easy: the foot lifts, then goes out straight . . . a combination of pushing and kicking.

It's Sunday on the beach at Antaura and every place is taken. Each striped umbrella has people sitting or lying beneath . . . people of every age and shape. Many of the women, the younger ones, are wearing bikinis, the kind that have only a narrow strip covering the genitals and leaving the buttocks exposed.

The water is calm but cold. A tree has washed up on the sand and lies there like an octopus with its branches reaching out. A mile or two offshore there are sailboats and motorboats.

The Africans go by with their display cases of watches, combs, beads, and bracelets. The man with the fake Louis Vuitton bags. The man who sells ice cream: "Gelati graniti!" The one with coconut slices: "A lei coco!"

A black man stops by a woman with a child. "Compra," he says, "non é caro." "Buy. It isn't dear." She declines to buy. He asks her why. She repeats her refusal. He stands a while longer as if to compel her to change her mind, then moves away.

I'm reading *Whatever Became of . . . ?* by a man named Richard

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Lamparski. I found it in a suitcase on the third floor among suitcases and boxes brought here from San Alessio that were never unpacked. The book, with its biographies of people who were famous when she was young, must have been of engrossing interest to my mother.

> The beautiful prima donna of the Metropolitan Opera and motion pictures was born in 1904 in Deepwater, Missouri, an Ozark mining town. She attended the Central High School in Kansas City and went on to Bush Conservatory of Music in Chicago from which she received a Doctorate of Music in 1923.

So begins the life of Gladys Swarthout. Rosalind also wanted to be a prima donna. How did she conceive the idea? Not in Russia . . . there women only cleaned and cooked—they weren't even allowed to go to school. It must have been after she came to America and was living in Brooklyn, taking the trolley every morning to the factory in Manhattan. While sewing tucks in shirts she dreamed of singing at the Metropolitan Opera.

> "The Orchid Lady of the Screen" was born in Texarkana, Texas, in 1896. She was educated at the Sacred Heart Academy in New Orleans where she was chosen Queen of the Mardi Gras. After her picture appeared on the cover of rotogravure sections of newspapers around the country she was signed to a contract with Vitagraph Pictures.

One day a man came to the factory where Rosalind was employed. He stood by the door as the women emerged, asking if any young lady would like to be in motion pictures.

She took a train to Fort Lee, New Jersey, where the studios were, and applied with other "hopefuls." She was listed as a "supernumerary," and she discovered that in order to be given parts you had to be able to dance, ride, and swim.

(I've told this story in other places but it is needed here, and why shouldn't a writer be allowed to tell the same story again from a different angle? Painters do it all the time: they paint the same woman, the same cathedral, the same water lilies, over and over again. The subject may be the same but the paintings are different . . . they're not the same thing.)

One day the leading actress was supposed to jump from a height into a tank of water and act as though she were drowning. She refused, and Rosalind took her place. She jumped and gave

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a striking performance, for she couldn't swim. After that she took swimming lessons, dance lessons, and riding lessons in Central Park. She attended an acting studio on 42nd Street.

Annette Kellerman and her troupe of bathing beauties were sailing for Jamaica to make a movie. When the SS *Almirante* pulled out of New York harbor Rosalind was aboard.

> The first woman to wear a one-piece bathing suit and to attempt to swim the English Channel was born in Australia in 1888.
>
> Crippled by polio shortly after birth, Annette had to wear large steel braces about three times the weight of those used today. She was, however, determined not to allow her affliction to break her health or her spirit.
>
> In 1914 she was starred by Universal Pictures in *Neptune's Daughter*, a great box office success . . .

Some years ago my mother tried to write an autobiography. "Jamaica," she exclaims, "what beauty for eyes that had never seen luscious tropical fruit and flowers!

"Every day we practiced swimming in the pool before work would begin. The practice session was witnessed by most of the young blades. Such a show of young beautiful girls in bathing suits was an unusual sight not to be missed—although we wore bathing stockings joining our costumes. It was only a discreet décolleté, still, for those Jamaican lads that constituted a risqué attire, and we were showered with sweet attention such as boxes of candy and occasional flowers. Amongst such sightseers was a prominent lawyer who asked a friend of the company to introduce him. He was most persistent and I finally met him.

"In the meantime our director was ready to make some of his scenes. He wanted to use the young members of the company as nude statues in harem scenes, avoiding costly marble or gypsum statuary. Some accepted and a few refused, since we were supposed to act as mermaids only—I for one could not imagine myself in such a role. I felt that my life would be irrevocably ruined, and I flatly refused. My job terminated with that refusal. I broke my contract according to the indiscernible second page that hardly anyone reads—anyway not a seventeen-year-old girl."

So she sailed back to a flat in New York. The "prominent lawyer" wrote to her: "Heavy six-page letters would arrive almost twice weekly. We lived at that time in a garden apart-

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ment on East Broadway. The letter would fall with a thud and I would eagerly pick it up and go into my room and read his outpouring of endearments to me who never had any experience and never enough love at home. Mother certainly had no time for such nonsense—it was too hard a life, caring for her large family."

All her life Rosalind would be waiting for the love she never had at home.

> It eluded us then, but that's no matter—
> tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our
> arms farther . . . and one fine morning—

Vincenza speaks in a loud voice close to her ear: "Are you tired? Do you wish to go to bed?" She nods slightly, and Vincenza calls to Grazia, and they lift her between them and carry her from the chair to the bed.

2

We have decided not to have a car while we're in Italy. A rented car sitting in the drive at so many thousand lire a day demands to be used, and we may not want to go anywhere. Besides, you don't see the scenery when you're driving, you have to pay attention to the road.

So we took the bus to Pisa. Miriam wanted to visit the Musèo dell' Opera, but it was closed when we got there, so we had lunch, then visited the Campo Santo. We never tire of looking at *The Triumph of Death*, the Last Judgment, Hell, and the anchorites living among caves and rocks. Scholars say that Chaucer visited Pisa when *The Triumph of Death* was being painted. When he came to write the tales of the pilgrims he must have recalled these men and women riding toward three corpses in progressive stages of decay.

The Musèo opened at three. There was a *Madonna del Colloquio* by Giovanni Pisano, remarkable, said the printed guide, for the position of the child on the arm of the Madonna and the "speaking looks" that gave the sculpture its name. In another room there was an ivory Madonna and child by the

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same artist with an original "solution": the sculpture follows the curve of the elephant's tusk, the Madonna leaning back to balance the child she is holding in her arms. The pose is natural and charming, but I am thinking of the elephant. The human race in 1300 didn't think twice about killing an elephant for its tusks. Our thinking hasn't advanced much since that time, and the elephant is about to disappear. How does the Madonna feel about the extinction of the elephant? Does her son have anything to say about animals? I don't recall that he does.

Vincenza says that Rosalind had a good night. She slept and this morning she ate her broth. But then there was a crisis: she couldn't breathe because of the liquid in her chest and her lips were turning blue. Vincenza gave her a pill to slow the heart beat, another to lower the blood pressure, and a third for her stomach. The crisis passed.

Renato comes into the bedroom with a new medicine. He has also brought a bunch of red, long-stemmed roses for Rosalind. He goes out of the room and there's an explosion of voices . . . the voice of Rosina raised in expostulation: "Calm yourself! I am not in forced labor." Apparently he asked her to bring a vase for the roses and she's not doing it fast enough.

Vincenza leans over Rosalind, persuading her to put out her tongue. She gives her a capsule for the catarrh and holds a glass of water to her mouth. Rosalind swallows with gurgling sounds.

Vincenza takes Rosalind's pulse, looking at her watch. She moves Rosalind's head to an upright position on the pillow—it keeps tilting to one side.

There's another outbreak in the hall. Rosina, who beside cleaning the house also does the laundry, wants Renato to wear his cotton underwear, but he insists on wearing woolen underwear, for he is always cold. The house is still being heated . . . at the end of June!

Vincenza goes out of the room to take part in the discussion.

The radio is playing a piano concerto. Mozart is good, but the comedy of Renato and Rosina is also good.

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This morning I called my brother in Canada and gave him an account of Mother's condition. He was grateful—he hadn't been able to get past the old woman downstairs, Grazia's mother-in-law who acts as switchboard operator. It was the Engineer's idea when he lived here to rig up a switchboard so that incoming calls could be monitored, as in an office. So the first thing a caller hears is the old woman croaking.

I asked my brother how he was. He said, fine. He has changed his doctor and everyone is astonished at his recovery.

I gave him a message from Renato: he mustn't do exercises.

Herbert believes in exercise. A room of his apartment in Toronto has been fitted out as a gym. The walls are lined with pictures of himself as a young man wearing trunks, in body-building poses.

Renato has asked me to call the hospital in Toronto where Herbert was treated after his heart attack. I am to get in touch with the doctor and tell him to tell Herbert not to do exercises. I listened to this idea with amazement. I told Renato that I couldn't undertake to do this . . . it was impossible. But I would pass on his message to Herbert.

In the afternoon we go to the beach. Sandra Gattai, the daughter of Attilia, Renato's niece, is there with her six-year-old daughter, Cristina, who's big for her age and very shy. She doesn't answer when we speak to her.

Sandra's husband, Cèsare, is an engineer. Sandra teaches English in a *licèo*. A few years ago they went to Venezuela where Cèsare worked on a building project, but the company went out of business and Sandra and Cèsare lost everything. They returned to this part of the world. Cèsare took a job teaching science in a school in Lucca while Sandra taught English in Barga. This is in the mountains, a hard drive in winter.

Now Sandra has found a teaching position in Viareggio, and they have bought another, bigger house in a more pleasant neighborhood. And Cèsare has found another engineering job. But it is in Naples. He has to be in Naples most of the week and is home only on weekends.

Renato's friend Emilio Berti, l'Avvocato (the Lawyer), found a position for Cèsare in Viareggio as superintendent of bus lines, an important position that would have paid well, but

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Cèsare didn't want it . . . he wanted a position in his field, engineering.

So Sandra and Cèsare will be spending most of the time away from each other. This can happen to young married people these days when women as well as men hold jobs. Living is expensive, and a couple with a child can use the double income.

The Woman from Wittenberg

There are many Germans traveling in Italy. The night before last Miriam and I had dinner at La Casina, a restaurant in the park we go to for a change from Montecatini. As we were having coffee a woman at the next table walked over and spoke to us. We think she must have heard our conversation and that we were discussing Germans. If so, she could have heard nothing to please her, for when the subject comes up Miriam says that they haven't changed, they are the same racists they were in the time of Hitler. I say that I don't think so, the young ones are different. But I say this without conviction.

The woman who appeared at our table and stood there saying something was about fifty, blonde, with a thin face and glasses. She excused herself, she didn't want to disturb us, she was sorry . . . but she was German.

I didn't know what to make of this, but I assured her that we weren't prejudiced, and invited her to sit down and have a coffee.

She accepted gladly and proceeded to give an account of herself. She was in Viareggio to study the Italian language. Her husband didn't pay her much attention . . . he was an important man and very busy, so she felt that she ought to have an interest of her own. She wanted to be an interpreter, though she had a degree in economics. Her husband's field was robotics . . . the use of robots in the factory or home. His work had taken them to San Diego in California.

She told us again that her husband didn't pay her much attention. They lived in Wittenberg and had two children, sons, who were now grown men. They were studying different subjects. One was an engineer . . . I don't recall what she said the other was. Children were a big problem today in Germany.

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The law said that you had to support them in whatever line of study they chose to follow, and if they changed their mind at thirty and wanted to take up something else you had to keep on supporting them. One of her sons was interrupting his studies in order to go to New Zealand. Two years ago he had gone to Australia, and now he wanted to see New Zealand and they would have to pay his expenses.

This description of German law sounded improbable, but we agreed that living with children these days could be difficult.

The trouble she said, was overpopulation.

I was trying to follow her. I said that in the United States we weren't able to keep up with the population . . . a large number of young people were not being educated.

She asked if we'd been to the South of France lately. The South was black. The only solution was to sterilize those people.

I sensed that Miriam's temperature was rising and she was about to explode. She did speak, but calmly, explaining to the German woman that no one had a right to sterilize people. She listened as though this were an original, unheard-of point of view. "You are very intelligent," she told Miriam.

We parted from her outside the restaurant and walked back to the villa. It was a while before either of us spoke. Then Miriam said, "It seems that they never learn."

The next morning at breakfast we told Grazia about our meeting with the German woman. She said, "We Italians don't like the Germans." Then she told the following story.

When she was a girl of thirteen the Germans declared Viareggio a "black zone," that is, a zone you were forbidden to enter. It was one of the places where the Allies might make a landing. Grazia and other people from Viareggio went into the hills, to the village of Santa Anna Stazzema.

One day her sister came to the village, having walked all the way from the place where she was staying, to tell them that the Germans were coming to Santa Anna Stazzema and they should leave at once. The partisans had killed two German soldiers and the Germans were planning to retaliate. Very few believed the rumor, but Grazia did and went away with her sister.

The next day the Germans came to Santa Anna Stazzema. They rounded up all the people, men, women, and children, and gathered them in the square in front of the church. Then

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they machine-gunned them. Some pleaded with the soldiers saying, "I am a mother. You have a mother of your own." But the German would kill the mother in front of her child. They made a fire with gasoline and threw children, alive, onto the flames.

One child, when the shooting started, fell under the bodies of her mother and father and her brothers and sisters. She was covered with blood. The Germans came looking for those who were still alive, to finish them off, but the child lay as one dead and they passed by. It was remarkably clever of the child: she was the only one to survive the massacre of Santa Anna Stazzema.

More than two hundred people were killed. Today if you go to Santa Anna Stazzema there is a monument in the square in front of the church, and photographs of those who were killed.

"The war is over," Grazia says, "and now there is tourism in Italy. The Germans come to Viareggio. The young men go to bed with the young women . . . that's to be expected. And we Italians are polite and wait on them. But we do not like them. There are many among us who remember. How can you ever forget such things?"

The sun is blazing from a light blue sky. People are standing in the water . . . few actually swim.

Three young women in bikinis walk along the beach and the men look them over. There are always three, I tell Miriam. She questions this and points out two together and one who is walking by herself. Yes, I say, but you'll see there are often three. As in war novels . . . *Three Comrades* . . . or stories about school days.

Italians are good-looking. Even the old ones who are thin or fat and bent out of shape seem to remember when they were good-looking. They care how others see them and try to make the best of what's left. Not like Americans who walk about in a cloak of invisibility . . . as doctors, accountants, truck drivers. Italians know they are being looked at; you can't go through life trying not to be seen; you are here definitely, a part of the universe, so you should try to make as pleasing an impression as you can. You owe it to the others.

When I first lived among Italians I thought their regard for

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"la bella figura" symptomatic of lightness of intellect. Now I think it means that life is real . . . eternity is here and now. At any rate, the physicality of the Italians strikes me as a lot more desirable than the abstraction of other races whose devotion to an ideal spoils all the pleasure in life and turns out, after all, to be symptomatic of pride, greed, rage, or some other vice. There are people living in Missoula who think that because they owe money to the bank and the car won't start they are morally superior. This could be a mistake.

A man with a brown skin and wrinkled face, apparently an Algerian, goes by carrying dresses on hangers. Some of the beach peddlers wear picturesque costumes and hats. A black man wearing a gown and a straw hat sits in the shade of an umbrella, bows his head, and rests.

On returning to the villa we find Renato stationed outside Rosalind's room. She has influenza and a temperature of 37.4 Centigrade. The doctor was here . . . she was calling for him. Vincenza also came—she left at three but came back for the emergency.

There are sounds from the room . . . sounds of pain: "Oh, oh!" We go in. Rosalind is lying on her back, looking up. I say a few words to her and her eyes look into mine as though she wants me to do something to ease the pain, but I'm not the one she needs, there's nothing I can do.

Vincenza says that it appears to be the left arm. Rosalind's hands are swollen and the pain can be atrocious. She puts some ointment on the arm . . . it has withered . . . loose flesh over the bone . . . and massages it. But Rosalind continues to cry "Oh, oh!" Vincenza lifts Rosalind's right hand and places it on different parts of her body. "Is the pain here? Here?" Finally Rosalind utters a sound that Vincenza interprets to mean "Behind." She is suffering from the ulcers in the lower part of her back.

Usually when she is suffering this way they move her to a chair, but to move her with a fever could be dangerous. Vincenza begins to work on her lower body and I leave the room. Miriam stays for a few minutes. Afterwards she tells me that the lower part of Rosalind's body is swollen, her stomach

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and the whole leg from the hip down. She has "edema," fluid collected from bad circulation, but this, Miriam says, appears more normal than the upper body which has withered away so that there is only skin and bone.

My mother's temperature is down and she is sitting up in the chair. We ask Grazia if there have been other such crises. She says yes, several. Six weeks ago Rosalind's heart appeared to have stopped—there was no pulse. For five minutes. They threw the windows open to let in air. The male nurse happened to be in attendance. He gave her an injection and the vital signs returned. A miracle!

Miriam says that yesterday when Rosalind had a temperature she thought she heard her say, "I am dead." Is it possible that she remembers something of the time, six weeks ago, when she was between life and death? That they are confused in her mind?

We go in to see her. She is sitting in the chair, propped with pillows, sleeping. I make a drawing. As I outline her features it becomes a drawing of a stranger. The face is longer and narrower than the face of the woman I remember. No one could tell from looking at her in what country or century she was born. The hair is white and thinned out, the scalp showing. The eyes closed, the head tilted forward, the mouth slightly open and twisted down in the right corner. Her cheeks have been rouged. This is grotesque, but who knows, she may want it so.

The drawing is of a stage of human life, extreme old age in fifth-century Greece, medieval France, nineteenth-century Russia. The human being simplified . . . the wrinkles ironed out. The skin stretched over the bone is as smooth as a child's.

> —Avez-vous observé que maints cercueils de vieilles
> Sont presque aussi petits que celui d'un enfant?

Last night the United States lost to Austria, 2-0. Whatever the Americans had learned about soccer in their previous matches they seemed to have forgotten in the second half. They kicked the ball down the field . . . to nobody, and therefore to the

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Austrians. When the goalie had the ball he took time to see that all the players were in their places. He should have got the ball out immediately to the players, who should have been running. When the Americans came near the Austrian goal they didn't know how to attack . . . their forwards couldn't shoot.

If the U.S. are going to play international football they need to use some of the South Americans who are wandering footloose in New York and Los Angeles, to show them how. They need to play frequently against teams such as the Austrians so they can learn their tricks. The Austrians, for example, are expert at fouling. When they aren't tripping you they know how to fall and double up, giving the impression of being *in extremis.*

The Americans need to learn that in international competition the object is not to play the game but to win.

The Italians also played tonight, winning their match against Czechoslovakia, 2-0. Cars came racing both ways on Viale Carducci, blowing horns and waving flags. There were some motorcyclists too, taking their lives in their hands.

We watched with Grazia from the top of the stairs in front of the villa. She spoke of the time that Italy won the World Cup. Renato's brother Giorgio, who used to play center forward for Milan, became so excited over the victory that he jumped in the air and fell and broke a leg.

Giorgio was living here at the time. He had lights strung along the sidewalk in front of the villa and a banner hung from the top floor: "Glory to the Blues of Milan!"

As we watch the cars racing by there is a scream as though someone has been hit. Or like the scream of an animal. Grazia and I run outside. There is no one lying by the road. There is, however, a woman dressed in white and carrying a large handbag. In the evening on our way home Miriam and I have seen one woman or another on the sidewalk near the villa. A car draws up and a conversation takes place.

Grazia speaks to her: "Have you seen a cat that was hit by a car?" She shakes her head, no.

What strikes me afterwards is the matter-of-factness with which Grazia spoke to the woman. As though she had a right to be there, like anyone else.

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Reading Gill's life of Wordsworth . . . The book is in mint condition—I was the first to take it out of the library though it had been there for two years.

When it returns and the others ask where it's been, what a tale it will have to tell! "I've been to Italy, going to the beach every day and eating at Lidino." How envious they'll be, those wretched books smelling of hamburger and onions, with their marks of dirty fingers and the thoughts of students scribbled in the margins.

Wordsworth accepted a government job as Distributor of Stamps. From then on he sucked up to the rich and powerful. And this was the poet who in his youth hailed the French Revolution! "Just for a handful of silver he left us."

Gill says that's just the point . . . it was only a handful of silver. We shouldn't be hard on Wordsworth . . . the job didn't pay well.

Today the sea is rough and the red flags are up. The lifeguard explains, "C'è una buca." "There's a hole." The waves dig out the sea floor and someone who's a poor swimmer can suddenly find himself out of his depth. Moreover, there's a current that pulls you out to sea. It is "molto pericoloso," very dangerous.

I've written elsewhere about the time my son Tony was caught in the current and I would have been unable to save him. The lifeguards came out and took him to shore. I think about it every time I swim at Antaura. I know what Laocoon felt as he struggled with the serpents that were coiled around him and his sons.

Yesterday a young man drowned at Viareggio. He leaves a young wife who is pregnant. Vincenza says that he ate a pizza and went swimming soon afterwards. She says that you must wait for three hours after eating before you go swimming. Vincenza is a good nurse but she isn't a swimmer.

I ask the lifeguard where the current is . . . a hundred meters out? No, another lifeguard says, much less. Fifty? Yes. On calm days is there a current? No.

I explain that I'm a writer and that is why I am asking questions. The lifeguards nod understandingly. Italians like to know the reasons for what you do. Keeping your reasons to

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yourself is unfriendly . . . to ask questions and not explain would be rude. Now that they know that I'm a writer they're pleased to have been asked about the "buca" and the current.

I'm through with the Wordsworth, and Miriam has finished *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* and passed it on.

> Never again shall I shake hands with man or woman who is not in truth my friend.

Ryecroft has broken with "society," which he never saw much of in any case. He won't pretend to be glad to see people with whom he has nothing in common and secretly despises. This appeals to me: I have very little to do with people at the place where I work—they certainly aren't friends. I say hello when one of them comes down the corridor and there's no way to avoid meeting. That is all. And Miriam and I don't have much to do with our neighbors. We agree with Henry Ryecroft that in the absence of friends you shouldn't make do with second-best. I think it is Wordsworth who speaks of "greetings where no kindness is." Going through the motions of friendship with those who aren't your friends takes the joy out of life. It's like living with someone you don't love. And besides, it prevents you meeting someone you might.

Rosalind is making sounds of pain . . . a sound between "Oh" and "Ah." Vincenza locates the pain as being in her head and gives her an aspirin, using the pill-crusher that I contributed to the cause. At least I was able to contribute something!

Rosalind's mouth moves and gurgling sounds come out. She coughs and seems to be choking. There's an anxious look in her eyes. They express infinite but not patient suffering.

She is choking. Vincenza says "Calma, calma," lifting Rosalind's head from the pillow. She is gasping for breath.

There are people and incidents of no importance, "string too short to be saved" as Donald Hall once wrote.

Yesterday Vincenza locked herself out of her house and had to climb in through a window. She didn't have time to have lunch between her job here and her job at the hospital. What a day!

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During the night a thief drained the gas from the tank of the old Mercedes Renato leaves parked in the lane behind the villa.

This morning Rosina is in good voice, singing "Come back to Sorrento" as she clumps up and down stairs with her mop and bucket. She alternates with whistling.

There are the people and incidents you see in the street. The old man wheeling a bicycle with a small boy sitting in the basket on the handlebars . . . The boy was singing happily as the old man, obviously his grandfather, wheeled him along. And now as we sit in the café having a Campari and soda we see them again, crossing the street, the old man wheeling the bicycle with the boy on the handlebars, coming up from the beach. They are like characters in an Italian movie.

There's the stout middle-aged lady who rides her bicycle on the esplanade every afternoon at five. In front of her, and around her, scampers a black cocker spaniel. He goes running in every direction, barking, investigating, meeting other dogs, and returns to catch up with his mistress as she pedals sedately, as happy as a dog can be.

> English cookery is the wholesomest and the most appetizing known to any temperate clime.

When I was a boy in colonial Jamaica we were told that everything English was superior. How vastly the world has changed, and in such a short time! Henry Ryecroft thinks that nothing can equal the English form of government, English home life and, of all things, English "Puritanism." He praises the "delicacy" of English women. This is ironic when you recall that the author of the book, George Gissing, married a prostitute.

> Little girls should be taught cooking and baking more assiduously than they are taught to read.

That does it! Into the dustbin with Henry.

Miriam and I discuss with Vincenza yesterday's high school exam, the dreaded Maturità. Her daughter took the mathematics exam. It was extremely difficult: only four or five students out of 112 think they passed. The students came out of the

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examination crying and vomiting. Angela, who stays with Rosalind at night, also has a daughter who took the exam. It was a disaster.

Vincenza explains that much depends on the makeup of the commission that sets the exams. This year the commission is bad . . . drawn from everywhere, people who have no knowledge of the local schools and their methods. The students work with a certain teacher for five years, then the exam is set by someone who has a different method and expectations.

You have to pass the Maturità with good grades in all subjects to be admitted to a university. There is only the state university—there are no private universities, the students have protested against there being any. They say it would be unjust: people with money would be able to send their children to a university and others would be excluded. So there are no universities except those administered by the state, and entrance to these is determined by merit only, that is, by exams.

So the students themselves are maintaining the system that sends them out of the room crying and vomiting. The state system prevents many from entering a university who have done well in one subject but are failing another. A tremendous waste of human resources . . . all in the name of justice.

Today was our fifth wedding anniversary. This evening we walked the length of Viale Carducci looking at the Saturday night crowd, young ones, old ones, on foot and on bicycle. We agreed once more that Italians are good to look at . . . because they are living with enjoyment, that's what it is.

We have dinner at Lidino, which is open on Saturday but closed on weekday nights. Miriam orders spaghetti with white clam sauce. I have fish soup. Then we share a *frito misto*, the specialty of the house, a dish of fried shrimps, mussels, crayfish, squid, and small fishes. A lettuce and tomato salad on the side. For dessert, balls of vanilla ice cream with a coffee ice cream center. Then a cappuccino for her and espresso for me.

I tell Suzanna that it's our wedding anniversary and she brings us glasses of champagne, compliments of the house.

I am sitting across from Miriam. Behind her the sea, which has been breaking roughly all day, is somber and gray with a

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white surf. The sun is going down quickly, a red ball on the horizon. Suddenly it drops.

> He felt that his torture was caused by his being pushed into that black hole, but even more by his being unable to crawl into it himself.
>
> —Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*

Looking on as Vincenza gives Rosalind her medicine and she chokes trying to swallow, listening to her cries of pain and her attempts to form a word, "Help!", looking into her eyes, I am aware how frightened she is of dying, how, in spite of being racked by pain, in her arms and hands and legs, in her stomach and back, she clings to life, to her suffering, in terror of the black hole into which she is being pushed.

> He was prevented from crawling into it by the belief that his life had been a good one. This defense of the life he had lived was the hindrance that kept him from moving ahead, and it caused him more torture than anything else.

Why is she so afraid of dying? Because, like Ivan Ilyich, she cannot imagine a better life than the one she has had. This is why she cannot give it up and continues to suffer.

3

We spent the morning trying to get through to Alitalia to confirm our reservations. Impossible . . . the lines were "occupato." Renato was in his study with the Avvocato. I told him the trouble we were having; he called his travel agent, and the agent called back in a few minutes to say that our reservations had been confirmed. Renato said, "Tell me when there's something to be done. Don't try to do it yourself, you don't know how."

We spent the afternoon on the beach. At five o'clock Sandra Gattai, her daughter Cristina, and Sandra's mother Attilia, came to take us to see Sandra's new house. She and Cèsare moved in only a month ago. The house is impressive, solidly built—the previous owner meant to live there for a long time and took pains. Sandra is happy, too, about her new neighbors:

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in the last house she and Cèsare quarreled with the people who lived above them. The new house has three floors with no one living above, a two-car garage, and a paved area in the back they call the garden with a tree growing in the middle.

We sat in this area and discussed Rosalind and Renato, how he's trying to prolong her life. If he hears of a new medicine he must get it at once. What's he going to do when she's gone? What will he have to live for?

I tell the story of Rosalind's coming to America at the age of fourteen, bringing her two younger sisters with her. How she worked in the garment district, then became an actress, that is, an extra in motion pictures. She climbs the ladder to a platform on which bushes have been placed and a canvas painted to look like a cliff. Looking down at the water and the faces staring up at her . . . It's a long way down, and what if she misses?

The director shouts through the megaphone. She takes a breath and steps off. Everything flashes by. She comes to the surface choking and flailing. A wonderful bit of acting . . . Then they realize that she's drowning and pull her out.

Sandra drove us to see the Borbone estate in the middle of Viareggio that used to belong to the royal family of Austria and now belongs to the Barsantis. All but the Villa Borbone . . . that was donated by the Engineer, Benvenuto, to the Commune to be used for cultural purposes. But the remaining property, a hundred hectares and the buildings on them, is to be divided among the heirs. Renato's younger brother Giorgio, who played football for Milan, is to have the bulk of the property. The rest is to be divided among Renato; Renato's niece Attilia; another niece, Stefanella, who lives in Rome; and a fifth party whom Sandra refers to as "a stranger."

Nothing can be done, none of them can inherit anything, until Giorgio, who inherited 48 per cent of the property, sits down with the others and they agree who is to have what parcel of land and which buildings. There is more than enough to go around, but Giorgio refuses to meet with the others. He doesn't answer letters. Sandra sticks messages on his front door asking him to meet her, but he doesn't answer. She once made an appointment with Giorgio and his lawyer to meet on a Sunday, but he failed to show up. Meanwhile some peasants are living in

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the buildings free of charge, and the lawyers are dragging out the business.

Renato as the oldest surviving brother stood next in line to inherit, but the Engineer willed him a sum to be paid every month by the construction company and to cease with death. The Engineer never married, and he disapproved of marriage for your estate went to your wife's relatives. So he passed over Renato and left the bulk of the estate to Giorgio who isn't married and everyone says is "pazzo," crazy.

Renato sometimes says ruefully that he lost a fortune when he married Rosalind, and it happens to be true. The Borbone property isn't all that Giorgio inherited. There is the company in Venezuela. He inherited the company offices in Rome, a shipyard in Viareggio, and a share in the beach property, Antaura, Principe, and so on. He owns an orange grove in Florida. Moreover, the Engineer left the Villa Selene to be divided among the family, so that no one really owns it. Giorgio has a part of that too.

Sandra let us off at Montecatini. We had dinner and walked back on Viale Carducci. The sidewalk was crowded and Miriam said, "The air is throbbing." And it seemed to be, as though the crowd had a single life that could be felt and heard. But in a few minutes we arrived at a circle of onlookers and a band of musicians. They were dark-skinned; they wore dark felt hats, serapes, and espadrilles. Some wore their hair long down their back. One was playing a guitar, another an instrument with ten strings like a mandolin, another a ukelele. The drummer beat the drum with one hand; in the other he held a wooden flute of reeds tied together on which he blew emphatically, making a shrill sound.

They were "Peruvianos." One of them who wasn't wearing a serape, apparently the manager, went around the circle with an open instrument case into which people were throwing thousand-lire notes. They liked the music.

Downtown with Renato driving the old Mercedes . . . Hair-raising, for his vision is poor and he drifts across the median line into the path of oncoming traffic.

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We went with him to the travel agency where he asked for Vittorio. A young man appeared, smiling, and gave us a slip of paper, a note to the airline saying that our reservations were confirmed and that they should be upgraded if possible, for I was an important person . . . "Premio Pulitzer Prize."

Miriam and I could hardly keep a straight face. Renato always introduces me as "Premio Pulitzer Prize." At first I thought he was joking, then I realized he was serious. And the people to whom he introduced me took it seriously. I didn't try to tell them why they shouldn't. I let them think a Pulitzer prize was important, since thinking so made them happy.

We parted from Renato—we were to meet again at Tito's for lunch. Then we walked to the post office to mail some books to the U.S. The clerk had white hair and looked at us over his spectacles like a clerk in a novel by Dickens. In sealing the book-mailing envelopes Miriam had covered some printed words. These had to be uncovered, which he did carefully with a fingernail. He looked up the reduced tariff for books, weighed one of the packages, wrote down the postage . . . on the wrong package . . . corrected his error, and tied the package with string. Meanwhile a line had formed behind us. I'll say this for them, they were patient. You have to be when you go to the post office in Italy.

We went looking for oil and vinegar cruets but couldn't find the store where we'd seen them. The heat was intense. We were looking for a place to sit when we saw Renato across the street, ensconced outside a café. We went over and sat with him. Everyone who came by seemed to know him. A woman stood by the table and talked to him, leaning over and patting his cheek from time to time to emphasize a point.

He was reading *La Nazione Viareggio.* What was this? A photograph of the Villa Rosalinda where he and Rosalind had lived for eighteen years . . . with an advertisement:

Clinica Gastronomica
la
Dispensa
organizza:
Matrimoni, Cerimonie, Meeting Aziendali

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The villa had been turned into a banquet hall. For business meetings and weddings . . . "con Cappella Privata," with a private chapel. He kept staring at the ad.

Rosalind shouldn't see this. No, we said, she shouldn't We didn't say that she wouldn't be able to read it or even see the picture.

The Avvocato joined us at Tito's for lunch. We were early and had the restaurant to ourselves. Miriam ordered a cold fish salad she remembered from her last visit to Tito's. Renato and the Avvocato ordered steaks, big ones, real "Fiorentinos," for the Avvocato has been ordered by his doctor to eat steak to reduce his weight. He is suffering from a slipped disk . . . at least, that's the diagnosis. "I'd rather have spaghetti," he said, looking at the dish I'd ordered. Following this I had fish broiled and served on a skewer. Miriam had a steak too, but much smaller than the large portions Renato and the Avvocato were devouring as though they wouldn't be allowed to eat like that at home.

According to the Avvocato, the high school exam about which there had been so much discussion because it was so difficult was three times as difficult when he was young.

Renato went to the men's room and the Avvocato said, "Renato is a great man. There are all sorts of people in Viareggio. Sometimes you'll see someone who's bent under his woes, with a doleful expression. He sees Renato and all at once he smiles."

I could testify to the truth of this. I had recently paid a visit to a man I had known for thirty years and thought of as a friend. I found that he had changed—perhaps it would be truer to say that certain tendencies in his character had become stronger. A change in quantity can be a change in kind and he was no longer the man I knew: he was self-centered, cold, repellent.

I was thinking about this and musing on the transitory nature of friendship and of life in general. "You look sad," Renato remarked. I hadn't been conscious of feeling sad. After all, the sun was shining on the hills above Viareggio. I had just come from swimming, and I was with the woman I loved.

But still there was the vibration of a thought like an instru-

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ment in an orchestra playing off key. A friendship was over and I would probably never see that man again. I felt that life had been diminished. It was this vibration Renato felt and extracted from the rest. To this he turned his attention, and he drew my attention to it, revealing my sadness to me so that instead of going through the day vaguely troubled I was able to put my finger on the cause, isolate a thought and separate it from the mass.

It wasn't life that was making me sad . . . not even my mother's life coming to an end, for there was nothing sad about it. Her life had been a *romanzo*, a story that was ending as such stories must.

No, it wasn't life . . . there was nothing wrong with life. The trouble was people, and there wasn't much you could do about them. But you could do something about yourself: you could take care not to become that kind of person . . . the friend who was no longer a friend, absorbed in his thoughts and with no affection for others. Life didn't have to be that way . . . you could live according to reason.

When Renato pointed out that I looked sad he restored the rule of reason, which is never sad, and I became one of the people who, upon seeing Renato, smiled.

We did not tell her we were leaving—Renato asked us not to, it would upset her greatly. As it turned out we could not have said good-bye in any case, for she had two injections the night before, one for the pain in her leg and one to make her sleep, and today she was still sleeping.

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CARYL EMERSON

Soviet Civilization: Its Discontents, Disasters, Residual Fascinations

During the Sakharov Memorial Congress held in Moscow at the end of May 1991, one moment in particular seemed to pull into focus the pain and exhilaration of the past six perestroika years. In the huge lecture hall of the Rossiia Hotel off Red Square, a roundtable exchange was taking place between Yuri Orlov, eminent physicist, civil rights activist, veteran of the Gulag and currently professor at Cornell University, and Gavriil Popov, the tough-minded, hard-pressed reformist mayor of Moscow. The question (as always) was: "Whither Russia?" Neither man had much good to say of Gorbachev's current policies, but their dissenting opinions fit neatly into the two time-honored options for Russian intellectual history: Slavophile versus Westernizer.

For a Slavophile, Russia's specialness is a source of fascination and strength. "Every Russian is at heart an anarchist," Professor Orlov began. "So we must let Russia be reduced for a time to total non-government, to complete independence from centralizing structures; what will emerge we do not yet know, but it will take at least a generation for our people to recover from forced impositions from above and to grow an authentic infrastructure." Mayor Popov seemed harried and impatient. In the hotel lobby, copies of his 1991 campaign booklet *Chto Delat'*? ("What Is To Be Done?") were on sale, attacking the "apparatchik perestroika" of Gorbachev in the name of a "democratic perestroika" that would "deParticize" the country and denationalize the economy.[1] We don't have time to be

[1] Gavriil Popov, *Chto Delat'?: O strategii i taktike demokraticheskikh sil na sovremennom etape [What Is To Be Done? On the Strategy and Tactics of the Democratic Forces at the Present Stage]* (Moscow: Izdanie gazety "Pozitsiia," 1991).

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special, was the burden of Popov's response. We have three to five years, and what we need is not respect for anarchy but a strong executive willing to protect the Western investor, as well as the Russian entrepreneur, against egalitarian fervor and confiscation of profits and property. Russia's pride at doing things on her own and her own way, he implied, had reduced the country to running on lies and on a slate of fantasy-words posing as solutions.[2]

Both professor and mayor had a point. Russia today requires the Slavophile's program of organic healing no less than the Westernizer's legal safeguards. But it struck me forcibly in the hall that although the old fault-lines of Russian culture were still in place under perestroika, what has often been conceived as binary is really a triad. There are the communist-bred bureaucrats and patronage networks, fighting for their life with the remaining lies at their disposal; the radical reformers like Popov, appalled at Russia's enduring primitiveness and determined to integrate her into the rest of the world both economically and politically; and the émigrés like Orlov, newly invited home to visit, who love Russia but happily have unlearned the daily strain (and personal insult) of living there permanently. In this final group are highly creative people for whom Russian cultural values have taken on a new sharpness of line against the background of a rich and sassy West. This West is cultural space they respect, but which they keep somewhat at a distance and perhaps even distrust—for its impatience, its "historylessness," for what they perceive as its chilling cults of accumulation, litigation, and privacy. Here again they echo their predecessors, the émigré refugees from Tsarism.

A curious parallelism emerges. In the Soviet Union, radicals who were once writers of fiction now find themselves forgetting literature in the interest of politics, searching the ruins for something that works *today*. By contrast, the émigré intelligentsia, with a foot in both camps and its choice of homes, is now admirably situated for the opposite move; for turning recent Soviet history into literature. It would seem that these writers

[2] For an excellent discussion of recent Soviet reassessments of Russia's "specialness," see Donald Fanger's review of Sinyavsky in "Homo Sovieticus," *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 March 1991, pp. 5–6.

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should have just enough distance on events to be able to devise an aesthetic fabric that will fix the avalanche of cruelties newly exposed in the Soviet past. Might it be that with their help, we will have a picture that still coheres when today's needs are over? Among those émigrés engaged in this excruciating, risky work, Andrei Sinyavsky is one of the most gifted and least sentimental.

I

Soviet Civilization: A Cultural History[3] is the voice of a witness turned historian. But unlike Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, his great and dour contemporary in this task, Sinyavsky never precluded a sense of humor nor delight at incongruity and fantasy from his writerly resources. On the contrary, for Sinyavsky a sense of the absurd and fantastic was always, and often defiantly, at the center of his aesthetics. His own biography almost mandated it. Twenty-five years ago, already a respected literary scholar, Sinyavsky was arrested for publishing abroad under the pseudonym Abram Tertz some absurdist short stories and an essay, "On Socialist Realism." This essay, now acknowledged a classic, exposed that lofty Soviet aesthetic as not realism at all but rather a branch of theological art—and called for a "phantasmagoric art" to reflect the genuine reality of life under socialism. The 1966 trial against Sinyavsky and his colleague Yuli Daniel, in which the two men were held responsible for "crimes" committed by their fictional characters, was itself a living example of absurdist narrative. The fate of these two writers became a rallying point for the nascent Russian dissident movement.

In 1973, after seven years in prison camp, Sinyavsky emigrated and settled in Paris. His most recent fiction recapitulating some of this past—signed "Abram Tertz" and brilliantly weaving fantasy, free association, personal memories of his remarkable father and parallels from sixteenth-century Russian history—appeared in the United States in 1989 as *Good-*

[3] SOVIET CIVILIZATION: A Cultural History, by *Andrei Sinyavsky*. Trans. by *Joanne Turnbull*. Arcade Publishing/Little, Brown & Company. $24.95; $11.95.

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night!, a novel. Several other whimsical scholarly studies are currently available in Russian and French, but not yet in English.[4] They include texts on Russian folk religion, on the eccentric turn-of-the-century philosopher Vasily Rozanov, on Nikolai Gogol, and (scandalously because irreverently) on the great Russian poet Pushkin. What marks all these works is a bold mix of genres and a playful, resilient, utterly fearless imagination.

The task that Sinyavsky takes on in *Soviet Civilization* is different. With Spengler's famous categories in mind, we might say that however repressive the Soviet contexts, Sinyavsky in his earlier fictional and essayistic works had still been able to speak of *culture*. "Culture" in the Spenglerian sense is the inventive spirit of a people in its formative years, when ideals—even where parodied—still radiate energy and generate new plots. They can work, if not a miracle, then at least a pretty good surprise. "Civilization," the second stage in Spengler's biology of nations, is a dead and discredited crust; and indeed, the crust under review in the present volume no longer generates anything. But for a mature writer, the creative tools that transform experience into narrative remain more or less the same from one book to the next. In writing this book, Sinyavsky was arguably as much hobbled as he was helped by his earlier strategies. Why might this be so?

Part of the answer lies in Sinyavsky's own dual identity as a writer. *Soviet Civilization* is signed "Sinyavsky," not the pseudonymous "Tertz," and this suggests to the reader—problematically, as we shall see—that its author is writing as a real-life witness and not as a novelist. In fact, this book (which has been published in French but not in Russian) was written up from lectures Sinyavsky delivered in a university course on Soviet Civilization. It falls into three parts. The first four chapters are historical: one each on the Revolution, on its immediate ideological aftermath ("Utopia Found"), on Lenin, and on Stalin. The second part (Chapters Four through Seven) are sociological: on the lineaments of the New Soviet Man, the

[4] For a comprehensive review of these works, see Joseph Frank, "The Triumph of Abram Tertz," in *The New York Review of Books*, 27 June 1991, pp. 35–43. Translations of two of these books are forthcoming from Northwestern University Press: *Little Tsores* and *Strolling with Pushkin*.

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Soviet Way of Life, and Soviet (as distinct from Russian) language. A final section opens with the eighth chapter ("Hopes and Alternatives"). It is an unexceptional account of the rise of the Russian dissident movement from the 1960s through the early 1980s, an account now hopelessly outdated and sounding a thousand years old. To bore his way out of this archeological ending, Sinyavsky adds both an Afterword and a Postscript, each of which makes intelligent, if episodic and perhaps too pessimistic, forays into the Gorbachev Era. (He foresees, for example, various types of Russian fascism, each of them more vicious than the tenor of the current pluralistic chaos.) Since scrambling to keep up is doomed to fail in all accounts of contemporary history, perhaps it would have been wiser to have ended the book honestly before perestroika began, while the dead crust was still formally intact.

More problematic than the inevitable datedness of subject matter, however, is the very appropriateness of Sinyavsky's mode of fictional thinking to theoretical and historical description. This is a rather serious charge and it by no means applies to the whole of the book. The middle "sociological" chapters are thick with marvelously astute observations. Let me begin with those strengths.

Sinyavsky tells us that he conceived the book after Western audiences routinely failed to understand his comments on Soviet life, forcing him to "scrutinize more closely the familiar features of my mother country, a face as magnetic as it is frightening and repellent." Indeed, none of us from the outside could have fantasized on our own the image of the New Soviet Man and his way of life that Sinyavsky draws. Soviet ideology, fed by illusions of a complete break with all pasts, prescribed a totally communalized, deprivatized, altruistic individual, one willing to sacrifice and die—and therefore to kill—for the common good. As Sinyavsky paraphrases the point: "It is moral to murder, to steal, to lie . . . just so long as one doesn't do this for oneself." Since criticism of communism has been fair game in both East and West for several years now, none of this has the cutting-edge it had for Sinyavsky's early audiences. Still, Sinyavsky dissects the everyday effects of such an ideology with epic skill. What seems to be going on is an inner-outer dialectic quite intimidating in its symmetry. The

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"New Soviet Man"—standardized, narrowly specialized, internally righteous, what Sinyavsky calls a "self-satisfied slave"—is provided by the State (at least during years of peace) with a bare minimum of goods and services, just enough to guarantee him an external life of "permanent insecurity." This, apparently, is the key to the paralysis: utter certainty about the rightness of one's system and future, coupled with massive instability about everything under one's nose. At the same time, language and labels are changed wholesale around him: modes of address are different, maps have new names, newspapers are full of invariable triumphs. Add to this the fact of terror and bribery, and the ordinary citizen is too bedazzled and exhausted to fight, or to doubt, on anything like an effective scale. But not too exhausted to harass and despise his neighbor in a communal apartment, or to resent anyone who is a little better off.

Sinyavsky's discussion of this last trait, the fierce popular envy against the better-off and consequent resentment of the entrepreneurial spirit, is among the most valuable parts in the book. As has often been remarked by those who doubt Russia's transition to the market, we can expect trouble when a suspicion—or worse, a criminalization—of wealth achieved for oneself and on one's own initiative is combined with the State's right to reward its bureaucratic servants for managing communal property. Since neither side has a clear grasp of the responsibilities (as opposed to the easy benefits) of property ownership, the result is an almost certain impoverishment for both state and individual. Here, one can only regret that Sinyavsky did not supplement his account of ordinary Soviet life with a few pages devoted to the ways of the rulers, the rich. For any foreigner can see the shortages and shabbiness. What is hard for us to grasp is that even the privileged in the Soviet Union live in a condition of acute insecurity and spiritual impoverishment. Since legally everything comes from the State, the rich have servants but all of them are spies; the rich have property but only during their term of obedient service, and, for those sensitive to such things, the ideology of a Workers' State always and aggressively gave the lie to their very existence as a ruling class. Thus two things that we in the West assume privilege can buy—an independent sense of accomplishment and a private life—are not part of the life of the Soviet elite.

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A system so wasteful and unproductive at all levels could hardly have established itself without some historical precedent. Sinyavsky notes the role of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century intelligentsia, which he discusses (with some confusion, and insufficiently differentiated) in two categories: on the one hand the well-meaning but "spineless and skeptical" intellectuals of a Chekhovian sort whom the Party reviled, and on the other hand the radically utopian, ascetic, collectivistic thinkers who challenged the Old Regime with a debased and inflexible brand of utilitarian thinking. In discussing these latter precursors to Bolshevism, Sinyavsky mentions in passing the radical intelligentsia's most severe domestic critics, a group of ex-Marxist religious philosophers and humanists who in 1909 (four years after the failure of the first Russian Revolution) courageously published a collection of essays entitled *Vekhi*, "Landmarks."[5] Sinyavsky might have found, in that anthology's lead essay by Nicholas Berdyaev, the perfect epitaph for Soviet Civilization. "In the consciousness and feelings of the Russian intelligentsia," Berdyaev wrote, "the interests of distribution and equalization always dominated over the interests of production and creativity."[6] In 1990, the first facsimile edition of these essays was reprinted on Soviet soil in 50,000 copies (a relatively modest run for Russian publishers), with a tiny prefatory note recommending the book to all those "interested in the history and political culture of their homeland."[7]

II

Thus have the disheartening truths laid out in Sinyavsky's *Soviet Civilization* now become legal tender in his own home-

[5] For the record: Sinyavsky shares the Russian habit of idealizing the revolutionary intelligentsia, and in the process he somewhat miscasts the *Landmarks* volume. Its authors were *not* out to "revise their (i.e. intelligentsia) tradition" (p. 136) but rather to wage unforgiving war against it, and to claim for their alternative vision Russia's greatest writers, from Pushkin to Chekhov.

[6] Nikolai Berdyaev, "Philosophical Verity and Intelligentsia Truth," in *Signposts: A Collection of Articles on the Russian Intelligentsia*, trans. and ed. by Marshall S. Shatz and Judith E. Zimmerman (Irvine, CA: Charles Schlacks, Jr., 1986), 2. Translation adjusted. Sinyavsky's image of the "New Soviet Man" is also uncannily prefigured in a later essay by Sergei Bulgakov, "Heroism and Asceticism," pp. 28–32.

[7] *Vekhi: Sbornik statei o russkoi intelligentsii*, reprintnoe izdanie (Moscow: Novosti, 1990), frontispiece.

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land. Where are the weaknesses in his account? To my mind, the least satisfying sections are the early chapters on the heroes of the Revolution, Lenin and Stalin. These weaknesses appear as the flip side of Sinyavsky's talents: his sure grip on techniques of the absurd and the theatrical, his scrambling of genres, his unself-pitying imagination. But when despots begin to benefit from "the imaginary," we have left the realm of history.

Take, for example, Chapter Three on Lenin, subtitled "The State of Scholars." Sinyavsky's thesis is this: the Bolshevik intellectuals around Lenin were bookish hyper-rational men, not practical politicians but "scientific experts in political struggle." Lenin himself, always at work over some master scheme or utopian projection, just didn't understand acts of gratitude or compassion; he "evidently lacked the irrationality that is natural in any person." Because he so sincerely believed that the study of Marxist principles could yield a scientific blueprint, a concrete analysis of particular historical situations, Lenin, according to Sinyavsky, "was not a utopian," that is, not an impractical dreamer. Nor could he be called personally ambitious. And then the stunning two sentences that so many reviews of Sinyavsky's book have cited: "The incomprehensibility of Lenin is precisely this all-consuming intellectuality—the fact that from his calculations, from his neat pen, flowed seas of blood, whereas by nature this was not an evil person. On the contrary, Vladimir Ilyich was a rather kind person whose cruelty was stipulated by science and incontrovertible historical laws."

In my view, there are two things seriously wrong with this verdict. First, it's an unacceptably simplistic definition of cruelty. That Lenin was a kind man, or that (as we learn later) Feliks Dzerzhinsky, founder of the secret police, was not by nature cruel and even loved children, are incongruent details that might delight the reader of absurdist fiction but seem an unjustified exoneration around which to build a historical portrait. Cruelty, after all, is not just the Ivan-the-Terrible type anecdote, an individual's personal taste for sadism. That's ugly, of course, but how many victims can one person process in a day? Personal cruelty begins to count precisely when its author sets up the impersonal mechanisms that enable many people to be killed, and then keeps a loving eye on those mechanisms all the time. Surely Sinyavsky knows this, but he persists in his

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belief that "by nature [Lenin] was not an evil person." Sinyavsky's account of such "merely abstract" cruelty would have benefitted, I think, by some quotations from Lenin's correspondence in the field during the Civil War.

"Essential to carry out merciless mass terror against kulaks, priests and white guards," Lenin directs a provincial party committee in August 1918. "Lock up the suspicious people in a concentration camp outside of town. Telegraph upon completion." Or to the city of Nizhny Novgorod on the same day: "Harness all forces, launch mass terror immediately, shoot and send away the hundreds of prostitutes, drunken soldiers, former officers and so on. Not a moment's delay."[8] As the compiler of this correspondence remarks, it's not clear whom to shoot, whom to send away, and in what order; also, that "and so on" at the end of the sentence gives one pause. Note that we are not dealing here with the relatively simple and pardonable impulse of fear for one's life, for one's family, or with a question of obedience to someone higher up. Lenin *was* the higher-up. And if it is not a matter of self-preservation or following orders but rather a matter of mere theory, words on a page, that mandate indiscriminate killing, then I think we can fairly speak of a personal appetite for cruelty in the mind of the theorist.

This mollycoddling attitude toward cruelty is only half the problem with Sinyavsky's Lenin, however. The other half is the claim to science. For Lenin's "all-consuming intellectuality" which loosens seas of blood is *not* scientific. It's quite possible that Sinyavsky is using the word "science" in the specific sense it acquired within the Russian intelligentsia tradition, namely, to designate a materialist, utilitarian outlook on the world that eschewed subjectivity or sentimentality. But non-Russian readers have some trouble, and it is right that we should, with Sinyavsky's equation of science with simple calculation, claims to predictability, or the desire to be "businesslike" about categories and classifications. Those processes are just voodoo and opportunism, one would think, without some procedures for falsifiability and verification. Science requires checking in now

[8] Venedikt Erofeev, "Moia malen'kaia Leniniana," *Novoe russkoe slovo*, 4 October 1988. This material originally appeared in the émigré journal *Kontinent*.

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and then with reality, adjusting means to ends. Sinyavsky sees this too, of course—and perhaps he is even writing in the ironic mode, working both sides of the street—but on balance he seems altogether too impressed with the arrogant hard-core claims and working habits of the Bolshevik fathers. Call it fanaticism, call it the art of political terror, but why bring in scholarship and science?

A related problem arises in the following Chapter Four, "Stalin: The State-Church." Here the thesis is a well-tried one: that much of Stalin's magnetism was due to his theatrical skills, his seminarian's knowledge of the Orthodox Church and its rituals, the ecclesiastical aura that accompanied this cunning but irregularly educated ruler. If the scholar Lenin altogether lacked irrationality, then the high priest Stalin employed irrationality with choreographed accuracy and to perfect obfuscating effect. In *Soviet Civilization*, this artistry alone somehow works to relieve Stalin of responsibility. One could not understand Stalin, Sinyavsky writes, but only worship him. Here the reader wonders: wasn't it all much less fancy, more a question of forced unanimity, daily intimidation, piecemeal erosion of personality? For some reason Sinyavsky keeps racheting it up to the metaphysical plane, where literature connives to prettify history. He devotes much space, for example, to Mikhail Bulgakov's brilliant novel from the 1930's *The Master and Margarita*, where parallels between Satan, Stalin, and Pontius Pilate abound and which ends breathtakingly on a mysterious spiritual synthesis. "Ultimately," Sinyavsky writes, "everything connected with Stalin is so involved and obscure that it's often impossible to know how to interpret the facts."

It is not for my generation to doubt the sincerity of that statement. But now that we are awash in facts, it might be time for someone to say that this is not the cultural history of Soviet civilization we any longer need. The romanticizing of revolution, and the aestheticization of evil which so often follows in its wake, are tired ideas. And—let me be frank—they are dangerous ideas for a country that gave us the Underground Man, with his desperate but intoxicating claim that 2 x 2 = 5 holds out the promise of human freedom. What we need now is less of that celebration of fantasy and more George Orwell: the image of Winston Smith wanting nothing other than the right

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to insist to his torturer O'Brien that 2 x 2 = 4. This way of reading will not furnish the pleasure of the fictional contract, to be sure, and it is not as emotionally satisfying as summing up the politics of Lenin and Stalin in an aesthetic image. But the very best parts of Sinyavsky's book are absolutely in the 2 x 2 = 4 category, straight-out accounts of the ghastly quotidian effects of the regime. In the Soviet Union today, incidentally, abstract aesthetic images are having a hard time of it, especially in the political sphere. The generic utensil is everywhere preferred. One often hears the most famous symbol of all—*serp i molot*, the "sickle and hammer" representing the union of peasant and worker—referred to as the murderous weapon more fitting its actual historical function: *molot i krivoi nozh*, "hammer and crooked knife."

So what is to be done? Sinyavsky has woven for us a brilliant web of local observations and, prefacing them, a much less persuasive set of arguments for turning Soviet rulers into aesthetic fictions. Over the past five years, Soviets and Westerners, Slavophiles and Westernizers, have brought to light a vast amount of historical documentation on the Soviet period. Maybe we should just stop trying to make art out of it. Which is to say, the time of Arthur Koestler and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn has probably passed. Let their masterworks stand for posterity, but for the 1990s perhaps we should look elsewhere for aesthetic substance. And Soviet Communism? It was always a thin, banal, unscientific idea with a huge potential for hurting people and not being hurt in return. Let's just let it go.

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JOHN VAN KIRK

Newark Job

"Where are we going, Dad?"
—Ernest Hemingway, "Indian Camp"

Young Henry Bowman woke instantly at the touch of his father's hand on his shoulder. It was not yet light.

"Still want to go, son?"

"Yeah, Dad, yeah," he answered quietly, careful not to wake his brothers, who slept a few feet away. "What time is it?"

"About six thirty," his father said, "plenty of time."

The boy climbed down silently from his upper bunk, and put on the clothes he had set out the night before. In the bathroom, he washed his face while the man shaved—the washrag and safety razor alternately passing through the stream of steaming water—and he combed his hair in the lower part of the mirror while the man was wiping away the last traces of shaving cream in the upper. Black whiskers swirled down the drain. The boy carried his hiking boots downstairs to the kitchen where the kettle was already whistling, made instant coffee and toast for his father, and fixed himself some tea and a bowl of cereal. He was lacing up his boots when his father came in. "You know you don't have to go if you don't want to, son," the man said. "We're gonna be gone all day."

"No, Dad, I want to go."

After they ate, they went down into the cellar where the tools and fittings were arranged in black buckets. The man quickly selected what he figured he would need, and the boy started carrying the buckets out to the car. The sun was a low, pale glow in a cold, grey sky. Nobody else was out. Some trucks went by on the street at the top of the hill, but that was all. The man carried out the big bottle of gas, cradling it in his arms like a papoose as he laid it gently on its side in the back of the old Ford station wagon. "Two more buckets and we're on our way," he said. When the loading was finished the boy had to get into

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the car on the driver's side, because both doors on the other side had been wired up with coat-hanger wire and a broom handle after the locks broke. The man turned on the radio as he started the car. He backed carefully down the steep driveway and headed up the hill.

They got to Sarge's Plumbing Supply at about ten after eight. A black boy about Hank's age was washing the windows of the storefront with a long-handled squeegee. Sarge was sitting on a high stool behind the counter with a stained coffee cup in front of him. He was smoking a fat, soggy cigar; and when he put it into his mouth his lips—normally thin as a British major's—would unfold around it, thick and shiny as the lips of a cartoon Ubangi. Behind him was a color picture of a yellow-haired woman kneeling in the center of an arrangement of chrome plated plumbing fixtures: faucets and taps, showerheads, traps and drains. . . . Her breasts were clearly visible through her sheer yellow nightgown. The white paper calendar that was stapled to the picture said: October 1965.

The hot water heater wasn't there yet.

"If that slumlord you're workin' for would shell out for a quality product I'd of had one waitin' for ya," Sarge said to Henry's father. "Hell, I got two Westinghouses out back now and a General Electric on the floor. But this other company . . . you can't hardly depend on 'em, you know? I don't like to deal with 'em."

"I know. I don't like it any more than you do; but work is where you find it. And when you don't have a license. . . ."

"Yeah, I guess so, but. . . . You know I never figured you for this kind of work anyway, you should a been a doctor or somethin'." Sarge looked over at Hank. "You know your ol' man was the best medic I ever seen, he saved a Jap's life when we were over there after the war. He ever tell you that?"

Hank looked at his father.

His father was silent for a moment, looking at nothing; then he looked back at Sarge. "When you expect it to get here?" he asked flatly.

"They were supposed to have it here first thing this morning," Sarge said, rolling the cigar around in his mouth; "but it's a shine outfit, ain't no tellin' when they'll show up."

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They waited. The man had a coffee, and he bought the boy a bottle of Coke from the red machine. The heater arrived about twenty minutes later. The driver and his helper put the long box into the back of the old station wagon. They wedged a hand truck borrowed from Sarge in on top of it. Henry slipped into the car through the right-hand window, which he had left open. The man made a wide U-turn in front of the store and snapped off a farewell salute to Sarge, who was now out on the sidewalk inspecting the windows. A tall, loose-jointed black man wearing a bright pink shirt, brown leather jacket, and wide-brimmed purple hat was crossing the street. "Hey, dark cloud," the man called out to him, gunning the motor and accelerating away.

They stopped to eat in a diner converted from an old railroad car. "I know it's early for lunch," the man said, "but I don't like to knock off once we start, and where we're going there's no place fit to eat nearby." The waitress called the man "Honey," and smiled at him like she knew him. They ordered Taylor Ham and egg sandwiches on hard rolls.

"Did you really save a man's life?" the boy asked while they ate.

"I guess so," his father answered, "but that was a long time ago."

The boy waited for the man to say more, but the man just ate in silence. Finally he spoke: "When we get there I want you to watch where you sit down," he said. "Your mom'll kill us both if you bring home any bugs. If you want anything more, you'd better get it now; we probably won't eat again till dinner." The boy had a piece of apple pie and a coffee light with sugar. He felt like a real working man and swaggered confidently on the way out.

"What are they like?" the boy asked as they drove.

"Who?"

"These people, where we're going."

"They're good people," the man said. "Mrs. Williams is kind of like a real life Aunt Jemima, big colored woman with a pack of kids. And she'd do anything for 'em, her kids I mean, or whosever's kids they are. I think they're her grandchildren mostly; she has a couple of daughters who are there sometimes;

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the little ones are probably theirs. Billy's her boy though. He's a good boy, good-looking too, real light, almost olive, about as good-looking a colored boy as I've ever seen. And his sisters are black as coal."

Hank tried to fit the color olive to a person, but he couldn't.

They entered a bleak neighborhood of vacant lots and boarded-up storefronts; newspapers blew in the cold wind. From the backs of some of the buildings brightly colored laundry flapped between steeply tilting grey wooden porches. In one of the lots some men stood huddled around a burning oil drum, their faces as black as the huge burnt sheets of paper ash that floated up from the barrel on shimmering waves of heat.

It was almost eleven by the time they pulled up in front of the sad-looking brick building where the job was. A few curled flakes of white lead clung to the dry grey wood of the doorway and window frames. The mortar between the bricks was crumbling away, and some of the corner bricks had already fallen out and lay broken in the grey dirt of the yard.

"This Mr. Hallinan's building?" the boy asked.

"Just about all the buildings on this block are Hallinan's," the man answered.

"But they're all so . . . I mean . . . they look like they're ready to fall down."

"Well, son, Hallinan is what you'd call a little tight, and I guess he doesn't want to put any more money into these places than he has to."

"But how can you work for a guy like that?"

"See those shoes you're wearing? You think they grow on trees?"

The man had keys, and he opened the main door and undid a heavy padlock that hung from a rusty hasp on a door off the entryway. This door led to the basement, and when it was opened a smell of dry mold and wet ashes flooded the landing, and the boy heard a rustling sound, like squirrels scrabbling up a tree. "Go get some of those bricks outside and prop open the doors, son, while I get us some light and clear the path for the heater." The boy did as he was told. Then, while the man rigged up a caged utility light with a long extension cord, the

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boy carried the buckets of tools down into the cellar. He didn't mind the cellar so much, his father there with him; but going out to the car alone—though it was only a short walk across the narrow yard—frightened him a little. He saw no one, yet he felt exposed out there, like a soldier behind enemy lines. His working man's swagger fled him and he felt small and vulnerable.

The man went out for the big torch, and then the two of them working together loaded the hot water heater onto Sarge's hand truck.

"Atta boy," the man said as they eased the rig down the worn and irregular stairs. "Careful there . . . easy does it . . . oookay, that's got her. . . . Yer gettin' stronger, Henry; I don't think I could'a done that part without you."

The boy swelled a little at this. "No sweat, Dad," he said.

They uncrated the big white heater, jockeyed it into position on a small concrete platform sunk into the dirt floor, and set to work. This was the part that the boy liked most. He set out the valves, the tees, and the elbows on a piece of newspaper; he cleaned up the connecting parts with steel wool until they shined, and he brushed the flux onto them when the man was ready. He had learned this while working with his father in his own house and on other jobs back in the suburbs; he had had to work hard to become good at it and to convince the man to take him on a Saturday job, a Newark job. Now the man even let him measure and cut some of the pieces of copper tubing. He measured them with the folding ruler, marked them with the stroke of a small triangular file, and then cut them with the tubing cutter, tightening it gradually as he rotated it around the tube until the circular blade broke through the pipe and the cut piece broke cleanly off. He then reamed out the newly cut part with the flat steel reamer on the back of the cutting tool until the inside edge was smooth and all the sharp copper slivers were scraped away. While he was doing this, the man lit a cigar and got the torch ready. When everything was neatly laid out, the man lit the torch from the end of the cigar and began to solder the pieces in place. Hank laughed when his father asked him, over the hissing roar of the torch, for a female tee. "The one there with the tits," he had said. Looking around while the man methodically sweated the solder into each joint, the boy

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could see where his father's work began and left off. Most of the pipes in the ceiling, aside from being old and crusted with rust and flaking paint, went every which way; but amidst all that confusion there were a few that ran straight and level, with square corners. Some had little white tags hanging from them to tell what they led to. That was what the cellar ceiling in Hank's own house looked like. But it was only now that Hank realized that not all plumbers worked this way. It made him feel proud of his father. Then the torch went off with a loud pop and sudden silence.

Now the man turned the faucet to let the heater fill with water while he hooked up the electricity. The boy looked at the wires that hung from the ceiling, their tips covered with red plastic screwcaps, ready to be connected.

"Did you run those wires, Dad?"

"About two weeks ago. We do it all, son." He smiled.

By the time the tank was filled, Hank's father had screwed the wires in, turned on the power at the fuse box on the other end of the basement, and switched on the heater. He then shut the water off that went to the Williamses' apartment.

"Time to go upstairs," he said.

Upstairs was like nowhere the boy had been before. The smell hit him first, not the same musty, pissy smell of the basement, but a new hot and smokey thick smell: the smell of burning lard and unaired crowded rooms. It poured out hot and stifling into the shabby landing when the door opened, and the boy swallowed hard and almost gagged on going in. But he got accustomed to it quickly, or forgot it, as the scene before him caught him up. His eyes roamed the place greedily, fascinated, taking it in from the floor to the ceiling, from the nearly vanished pattern of leaves and branches on the cracked and peeling linoleum spread like a carpet in the middle of the floor, to the visibly rotten boards that buckled beneath the feet of the rust-stained radiator hissing and steaming under the lone half-boarded window; from the stains like maps on the cracked grey walls, to the splintery slats of lath in the crumbling plaster ceiling. Dark laundry hung from a makeshift clothesline in one corner of the room, near the entry to what must have been the kitchen, and two small children slept on a narrow bed

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in another. In the center of the room was a hide-a-bed, extended, and a sleeping woman lay sprawled across it in a tattered slip. Her skin was as black as loam, and Hank wanted to look more because she was really almost naked and he had never seen a woman naked before except in pictures; but he felt embarrassed to be staring, and he had to look away. That was when he saw the trophies. One of the walls was covered with them; there must have been fifty or more, from small medallions and engraved plaques, to two-foot-high plinths and pedestals with Olympic-looking golden athletes on them.

"Those are mah boy Billy's," a soft voice drawled.

He looked to see who was talking to him. It was Mrs. Williams; it had to be. His father was right, she did look like Aunt Jemima, big and black and round and smiling. But in another way she didn't look like Aunt Jemima at all; that is, she didn't look like a cartoon, or a picture on a syrup bottle. She looked real, and there wasn't anything funny about her; and when he looked into her eyes, so dark they seemed black too, he smiled, liking her right away.

"We sure glad to see you, Mr. Bowman," she was saying to the man, "you know how long since we got hot water? Three weeks now. That Mr. Hallinan, he don't care 'bout us over here."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Williams, but I work durin' the week at my regular job, and every night this week I had to work on another job where they got no heat."

"Oh, ah know you come soon as you could; ah don' mean to complain. You a nice man, Mr. Bowman; tell the truth, ah don't know how that Mr. Hallinan get you to work for him, but ah'm glad he do." She turned to Hank and then back to the man. "And this your boy?" she said.

"Yes ma'am, that's my son Henry."

"Well, he is a fine boy," she said, "so handsome." Hank felt himself begin to redden. Then she turned to him: "And your fahtha," she said, "he's a fine man; you take aftah him an' you be a fine man too, a gentleman."

"Got the water turned off for a while," the man said. "Anybody needs to use the bathroom is gonna have to go over to a neighbor's."

"Oh, that reminds me; Miz Walker next door axt me to ax you if you come today could you go by her place run that thing

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you got down her toilet; it's been stopped up three four days now."

"Yeah, sure . . . okay. . . . Son, go on down to the car and get the snake and my black rubber gloves; we'll do that first."

Mrs. Walker's apartment was so different from Mrs. Williams' that it was difficult at first to believe it was in the same building. It didn't seem newer, and there was nothing new in it, but everything was clean and shiny. It smelled of lemons. There were carpets—threadbare and faded, but there—on the floor; and there were a lot of framed photographs on the walls. All the people in the pictures were black, and most of them were dressed in formal clothes. Mrs. Walker looked formal too: she was thin, with grey hair, and she stood straight and stiff like a schoolteacher. "Thank you so much for coming over, Mr. Bowman," she said, with what sounded almost like an English accent.

The snaking job was slow work. While his father cranked the steel spring down the toilet, Hank stared out into the living room. Behind all of the neatly hung pictures were the same cracked and peeling walls as next door; under the carpet were the same buckling floorboards; but the furnishings were arranged as if it were a fine house. There were doilies on the chair backs and arms.

When the steel snake was pulled back up, the foul stench that came with it was so strong it burned Hank's eyes and he realized that his father's cigar was good for more than lighting torches.

Mrs. Walker offered them sodas when they were through.

"Thank you, ma'am," the man said, "we'd be glad for the drinks, but if you don't mind we'd like to take them with us to the job next door."

"Of course," she said, opening the bottles, "and thank you again, Mr. Bowman."

Again the nauseating smell and stifling heat struck Hank as he and his father went back into the other apartment, but after the snaking job it didn't seem nearly so bad as before. They quickly set to work. First they had to connect a new line under the kitchen sink; and as the man opened the cabinet a swarm of brown bugs scurried away. The boy jumped when he saw them.

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"Just cockroaches, son," the man said. "They won't hurt you, but watch where you set your jacket; we don't want to take any home." Hank folded his jacket carefully and set it on the newspaper with the joints and pieces of pipe, he then sat cross-legged on top of it, ready to hand his father the tools and fittings as he needed them.

A short while later one of the little boys who had been asleep on the bed wandered up behind Hank to see what was going on. The boy had blue eyes and was sucking his thumb. He rocked a little as he watched the man work, and he put his free hand on Hank's shoulder to steady himself. Hank turned to him and asked his name, but the little boy ran away without answering, and jumped up onto the fold-out bed, waking the woman in the slip. She looked sleepily over toward Hank and his father, and hurriedly covered herself with a blanket.

Next a new shower had to be installed. This was Hallinan's solution to the problem of old rusted-out bathtub faucets: cut the lines and run a new piece of pipe up to a cheap showerhead. It took longer than expected to hook up because of problems anchoring it, and Hank could see that his father was unhappy with the ugly metal straps he had to use to fix the pipe to the crumbling wall. The man showed the boy how the fittings were designed to go inside the wall. When it was all connected, the man went down into the basement again to turn the water back on. When he came up again, they tested the new work, and Hank listened to the water rattle up the empty pipes. The connections were good, and the hot water was hot.

Then they noticed that a pool of water was forming under the old tub, which stood on four short iron legs, and it turned out that a piece of the drain pipe had rusted away. Luckily the man had a replacement part in one of his buckets, but that took time too. When they were at last ready to repack the station wagon, it was already growing dark.

"Will the men be coming home soon?" Hank asked his father.

"Huh?"

"The men, they'll be coming home from work pretty soon, won't they?"

"I don't know, son, I've never seen any men here."

"But . . . the kids . . . I don't get it."

"These people have their own ways, son. Seems like the men

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don't stick around long . . . they just . . . I don't know . . . run off after a while."

"And the kids?"

"Don't worry about them, son, you worry about you."

Hank noticed that many of the streetlights were not working, including the one nearest the car. As he and his father were carrying the last buckets of tools and fittings, an old pink Buick with a continental kit came screeching around the corner and skidded to a stop in front of the building. Two black boys a few years older than Hank jumped out of the car, and Hank saw his father tense. The young men opened up the back door of the Buick and helped another one to climb out. They were practically carrying him. Then the car drove off as noisily as it had arrived.

"It's Billy," Hank's father said suddenly when the boys got to the bright area at the entrance to the building. They were just dragging the limp body along now, and Hank saw a puddle of what looked like motor oil form beneath its feet as they struggled with the door.

"Stay close to me, son," the man said. "That's Mrs. Williams' boy." The man ran over to the door and the boy followed. "Henry, you go up and clear the way, and tell Mrs. Williams we're coming. One of you boys watch over my tools out there."

"Sure, mister," one said, "he gonna be all right?"

"I don't know, son. I hope so."

The man moved quickly, and by the time Hank had cleared the way to the small bed in the corner of the main room, he was already coming through the door with the bleeding boy in his arms, the other boy now behind him. "Get the kids out of here," the man said. "Henry, get those clean diapers we saw in the bathroom. Mrs. Williams, you get a scissors and some clean towels. If you have any tape, get it. No, don't wet them, there isn't time. He's weak from loss of blood, but I can't see where it's all coming from. Get me some light over here; the blood don't show up like on us. Hank, you mop him with the diapers, tell me when you find a cut."

The man was working on the face, which had a deep gash that cut through one eye and laid the cheek open to the teeth below it. The lens of the cut eye looked like frosted glass and

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the split white was red. The boy couldn't believe that this was happening. He was watching his father tape the face closed with Scotch tape, which was all Mrs. Williams could find; the man was having difficulty making the tape stick to the black boy's clammy skin. Then Hank found a pool of blood that he couldn't seem to get mopped up. It was down by the crotch and he didn't want to touch it and he couldn't find anything but blood.

"Dad," he said, "there's something wrong down here."

"Let me see," the father said, with surprising calm. "Ah, okay, give me the scissors."

Hank could hear the mother crying while he watched his father cut away the trousers. The other boy was telling her that they had been just sittin' around against the car by the school when these guys they didn't know showed up and started something.

"And why you ain't cut, George Johnson, and mah boy all sliced to ribbons?"

"We tol' Billy to let it go, but they kep' callin' him Indian and high yellow and he couldn't take it and he went for 'em. I think he cut one of them too."

"Oh, mah lord," said Mrs. Williams.

It was a big hole, Hank could see now, as his father wiped up around it. How did the knife get up there practically to his balls? And his leg was like a piece of carved wood, not olive-colored at all, but chestnut, with muscles like a statue, but like an ax had bitten deep into the upper thigh. The life was pouring out of the boy fast. The man took a diaper and cut it with the scissors, then tore it into a long thin strip. This he twisted and then drew up into the boy's groin; he brought the other end around under the leg and then pulled it tight. He must have caught the pressure point just right because the flow of blood slowed even before he got the thing tied off.

"Mama, get the shower warmed up and bring me some towels or blankets into the bathroom," the man said, as he cut or tore away the remaining clothing. He then picked up the naked youth and carried him to the shower. "I got to wash him up to see where else he's cut; thank god they got hot water now." The black boy groaned and shivered as the man slid him into the tub and directed the shower over him. "You're gonna be all right,

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son. Don't talk. We're gonna get you all fixed up." The water splattered pink against the wall and swirled in a red whirlpool at the drain as the man, getting soaked himself, mopped the boy roughly with a towel. The dark limp body glistened wetly, the drainswirl fading from rose to runny watercolor red.

"Mama, get them blankets now. Looks like I got all the big cuts closed, but we got to get him to a hospital right away."

The man lifted the black boy, wrapped in blankets, onto his shoulder, fireman style, and carried him downstairs and out into the front seat of the car. He then had to clear some of the buckets out to put the seat up for Mrs. Williams and Hank. "You watch this stuff for me," he said to the other two boys on the sidewalk. Mrs. Williams was struggling helplessly with the back door on the right-hand side. "That door doesn't work, ma'am," Hank told her; and he led her gently around to the other side of the car. The man drove quickly and efficiently to the hospital; he did not squeal his tires, but he did go through two red lights, after stopping first to check for traffic. The hurt boy was silent now; he was not even moaning, and Hank was afraid that he might be dead. The fat old black lady, when she wasn't giving directions, was mumbling something over and over to herself. Hank decided that she was praying. Her face was shiny with tears.

At the hospital things did not go as quickly as the man seemed to think they should. The emergency room was not full, but there were a lot of people in it. The only white people there were Hank and his father and two harried looking attendants, who were busy having everyone fill out the complicated admittance forms.

"Can't you see there's no time for this?" the man said. "This boy is dying."

"Yeah, everybody comes in here is dying," said one of the attendants.

"Is he your boy, sir?" the other one asked.

"Of course he's not my boy, you . . . you can see that, but . . . "

"Then he's not your problem, is he? Now Mrs.? What's your name? You have to fill this . . . "

"Hey," the man shouted, "do you hear me? Just how stupid

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are you? Do you think I patched this boy up and brought him here and kept him alive this long just so you idiots could let him die? Where's the doctor? I wanna see the doctor. . . . "

"I'm sorry sir, but the doctor. . . . "

"Just what the hell is going on out here?" boomed a deep rounded voice. Everybody in the place was suddenly quiet. At the doors that led into the inner part of the hospital stood a distinguished looking black man with a grey moustache and a white lab coat.

"Are you the doctor?" the man asked.

The black man just looked at him.

"This boy is dying. He's been in a knife fight and I had to put a tourniquet on his leg and I think he's gonna lose an eye, but you got to look at the leg, it's an artery that's cut. . . ." The man pulled back the blankets.

The black boy did not look so chestnutty now as he had in the dim light of the apartment. Or maybe it was the blood that he had lost, because he looked grey now. Hank did not know what dead looked like, but he thought that the boy looked dead. The doctor picked up the boy's arm by the wrist and looked at his watch. Then he dropped the wrist and bent low over the boy's ruined face, laying two fingers aside his neck. "The tourniquet?" the deep voice asked gently. The man uncovered the boy's crotch. The doctor looked closely at the torn strip of towel and at the wound just below it. "How long since you put this on?"

"Twenty minutes, half hour," the man said.

"Get a gurney out here." The doctor's voice filled the room. "I want this boy in surgery immediately, get him typed and get some blood into him." Then he turned to the man and said softly, "They work very hard, sometimes they do not see what is in front of them." A black nurse appeared from within with the cart and with the help of the attendants lifted the wounded boy onto it and wheeled him away through two swinging doors. "You have probably saved this boy's life, friend," the doctor said to the man. "Now I must try to save his leg. As for the eye . . . " he shook his head sadly, "first the leg." The doctor turned and walked away through the swinging doors.

Then they waited. They made a strange trio, Hank thought, sitting there in the waiting room, the white man and the boy,

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both spattered with blood, and the big black woman, rocking silently. Mrs. Williams suggested that Hank and his father go on home, but the man said that he would not leave her there. He made a telephone call to Hank's mother to say that they'd be late. Almost two hours passed before the doctor came back out. He addressed himself to the woman. "Your boy's gonna live, Mrs. Williams," he said. He looked tired and somehow older than before.

"Praise the lord," Mrs. Williams said. "Can I see him?"

"Soon. He's gonna be out for a few hours, you can look in on him before you go. Right now I'd like to ask you a couple of questions."

"What, Doctor?"

"Are you in touch with the boy's father?"

Mrs. Williams' head dropped. "No sir, ah am not."

"Is there a man around who can talk to him? Someone he looks up to?"

"No, sir, they ain't no man around, an' we don't need one. Mah Billy is a good boy."

"I'm sure he is, ma'am. He was an athlete, I could see that; built like a quarter horse, it's probably what saved him; but it didn't keep this from happening did it? I get lots of boys in here cut up, but not athletes like your boy. He shouldn't be here. But he is. And he's been badly hurt. He's lost an eye, and it's going to be a long time before he walks without a cane. But that's done. I'm worried about what happens now. He's not going to be running any races for a long while, if ever. What's he going to do? Who's going to stop him from going for revenge?"

"But Doctor? You said he was going to be all right."

"I said he was going to live. He's not going to be like he was. His leg is in bad shape, there could be nerve damage, other complications. He'll need therapy. It's going to take time. And he's lost an eye."

"Can ah see him now?"

"Yes, but just for a minute. The nurse will take you in. Goodbye, Mrs. Williams. I probably won't see you again."

"But who's gonna see to mah boy?"

"The regular doctors here are very good. They are more up-to-date than I am. I just help out in the Emergency on weekends since I retired from my practice. He'll be well taken

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care of. But you remember what I said about when he gets out. Maybe you can get a teacher to talk to him. Or a coach. This can't be allowed to happen again. These kids butchering each other like Cowboys and Indians."

As they went deeper into the hospital, the antiseptic smell grew stronger. Billy was in a pale green room with an old black man. Both of them were asleep. One whole side of Billy's face was covered with bright white bandages; the other side was ash grey; the rest of him was covered by the sheets. He looked smaller than before. Some tubes went from a bottle at the top of a pole into a needle stuck in his left forearm. Mrs. Williams knelt beside the bed, touched her son's arm, and seemed to pray softly to herself. After a few minutes the nurse ushered them out again. "Come and see him in the morning," she said. "You'll be able to talk to him then."

Hank and his father drove Mrs. Williams home. As they pulled up to the building, they could see that the buckets of tools that had been left on the sidewalk were gone. The man said nothing. But going in they saw that all the tools had been brought into the entryway and Billy's two friend were leaning against them. Their flashy clothes were rumpled and bloody, and they looked as if they had been sleeping.

"Is he all right?" they asked, almost in unison.

"He's alive," the man said tiredly.

The black boys didn't say anything more, but after the man took Mrs. Williams up the stairs to her apartment, they helped carry the tools out to the car. The man thanked them and held out two dollar bills.

"Thanks for watching my tools," he said, "they're my . . . thanks."

They wouldn't take the money.

"You helped our friend, mister, you don't owe us nothin'," one said.

"Yeah," said the other, "we owes you."

As his father pulled the car away from the curb, Hank looked back at the building, and for a moment, in the dark, he caught a glimpse of it as something other than what it now was, a glimpse, perhaps, of what it had been years before, when the dirt yard had been a lawn, and the mortar between the bricks

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was hard and white, and the trim was shiny with fresh paint. He saw men with hats in antique cars coming to call on women in dresses. But then the image fled, and he saw the same grey, crumbling wreck of a tenement. The man tuned the radio to the soft music station. They passed the lot where Hank had seen the burning oil drum in the morning, and it was still there, but now the blaze lit up the night like a bonfire, sending sparks up into the black sky, and casting long dancing shadows of the dark men huddled around it. Not long after that they turned onto a brightly lit avenue, and Hank found himself breathing an almost audible sigh of relief to be out of the darkness. He soon fell asleep.

When he awoke, the car was pulling up the steep driveway. It took him a moment to shake his head clear, and after he slid across the seat and out, he leaned lightly on the side of the car and worked his way around to the back to unload the buckets.

"That's all right, son," the man said. "We'll leave 'em till morning. You go inside and get cleaned up for bed. I'll tell your mother what happened."

Upstairs, Hank stretched out in the tub. A few hours ago he had seen another boy stretched out in a tub. The image burned in his mind. He looked down at himself and thought of the fine athletic frame of the other boy, the legs like carved wood. . . . Would he ever grow into a body like that? And then he thought of the blood, of the cut face, the horrible eye, and the gash . . . they had almost cut his . . . god . . . and he thought of that, which he had seen too—he had never seen a black one before—and he felt small and pink and more like a boy than the young man which he so wanted to be. Then he thought of the wounds again, and the foggy eye, and he scrubbed himself hard to wash off the dried blood and the plumber's dirt and all of it. He opened the drain and stood to dry himself, and as he toweled his body off, he watched the blood and grease and dirt swirl down the drain, and he thought of that other drain with the red blood swirling down it, and he wrapped the towel tight around him.

After the bath he went downstairs to eat. His mother had made him some sandwiches and hot chocolate. He had forgot-

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ten that he hadn't eaten since lunch. His mother asked him nothing about the day.

"Daddy saved a boy's life tonight," he offered.

"I know," she said.

He looked at her and she at him.

"It's late," she said, "eat up; you have to be up early tomorrow for church. Your brothers are all asleep."

He realized after a moment that he was grateful to her for not asking him more about it, for now that he thought about it he saw that he didn't want to talk about it after all. He ate the cookies she gave him after the sandwiches and then went up to bed.

His father came to see him in his bedroom. It had been a long time since he had come up to say good night. He went to the other bunk bed first, then to the bed below Hank's, gently adjusting the blankets over each of Hank's brothers. Finally he straightened up and stood with his hand on the headboard of Hank's top bunk. "I'm sorry you had to see that, son," he said.

"But I helped you, didn't I?"

"Yes, son, you sure did. I couldn't have asked for a better helper. Now, get some sleep."

"Okay, Dad. G'night."

"G'night, son."

Hank watched his father back slowly out of the room. He looked tired. The part of the floor brightened by the hall light shrunk and then winked out softly as the bedroom door was eased shut. Hank stretched out straight in his bed, worked the back of his head into the pillow, and waited for his eyes to get used to the dark.

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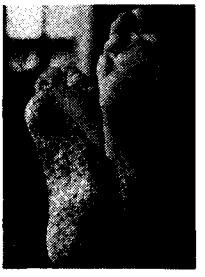

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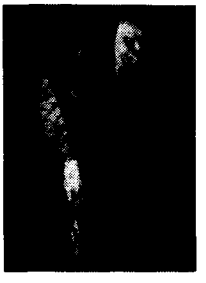

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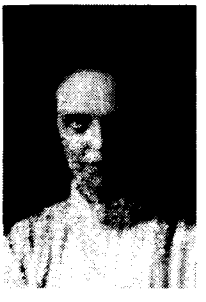

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JOHN FREDERICK NIMS

The Powers of Heaven and Earth

Dolce e chiara è la notte . . .

I

One summer—I was four or so—we lived
In a musty-colored clapboard in the country;
Absentee Nooley owned it; it was "Nooley's".
The front door, from the parlor, opened on nothing:
No steps; we could hiphop down from it into the milkweed.
The barn was mostly skeletal; a ladder
Sagged to its sagging roof. Once, halfway up, I
Looked downward: dead leaves stirred, then came in focus
As a rattler coiled. I wrenched myself off sideways,
Streaked for the kitchen door, stepped on a nail
—A phrase of some foreboding then: it meant
Pre-antibiotic festering that lingered
In the sole of a foot like the Savior's in Mantegna.

In spite of the serpent there, it wasn't Eden.
The garden was radishes, rachitic carrots,
Some ruffles of lettuce, potato bugs under the leafage
Sartorial in their striping; these we picked and
Consigned to the fumes of kerosene in fruit-jars.
All of these, though—the snake, the gaudy insects,
The nail—I interpret by feelings that came later,
Remember as emblem only. Adumbrations.

II

Anyway, Nooley's. That was where I met
The powers of heaven and earth. My calcimined
Nook had a "little window where the sun
Came peeping in at morn," hinged horizontally

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From the top; you'd push, then prop it wide with kindling.
Stretched tiptoe from my cot, I could just see out,
Which I did first thing most mornings. Over fields
Spectral with dew, off yonder but not far,
The railroad track ran glistening through cornfields.
The trains I'd do in crayon colors: Pullmans
In proper olive, royal blue, or cherry,
The oblong freights in purple, punkin, rust.

Then one day, one day only, the heavens opened.
I awoke, yawned, scrunched, uncurled, clutched for the window
And
  a *circus train*! In the yard almost! Just creeping.
Each car was—the word came later—psychedelic;
Outlandish calliope burled like a seashell, cages
Imperial in their panoply, every boxcar
Muraled with scenes of derring-do in jungles;
Each of them high baroque, a Renaissance altarpiece
—Bernini on wheels, I might have thought, years later,
As I thought of it once in a peacock-spread of fireworks
Over pomp of regattas on the Grand Canal.

So once in my life I woke to the apparitional,
To a jackpot strewn from the morning's cornucopia.

But the void when it rumbled by! the empty longing.

Did I go to the circus? Don't know. Just recall my
First view of the pomp and wonder of the world
Unfurling before me a moment, a *fragorío*
Like that of triumphant Rome poor Leopardi
Heard glorying over land and sea—then dwindling,
Her sinewy legions lost to dust and silence.

III

That was my morning memory. Now the night one,
And my mother's crooning tune to the *casta diva*.
A night of thunder and floodlit bursts of lightning,
Rain dinning the windows' timpani—kind of night she'd

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Get up in a ghostly smock, her lavish curls
Afloat on her shoulder, wander and unfasten
The fronds of palm festooning her holy pictures,
Palms blessed at the altar, Sunday before Easter,
In memory of those the Lord on His donkey scuffed through.
Ancestral voices led her? It must have been something
From cabin thatch and the banshee airs of Eire.
She'd light the tips of the fronds in a chimney-lamp's
Blue flame and walk the shuddering house, her fingers
Flicking the myrrh of ash from leaf ends, till
It floated in flakes toward rag-rug and linoleum,
To save the house from lightning. As it did.
That it didn't burn down the house was another miracle.
Sometimes, to back up ash, she'd sprinkle water
Also blessed in the church. That special night
The thunder—in awe of her leafy hands?—had lessened
To a cool and pitchdark stillness. Then she took me
To a window, brushed the curtains back, and
there!
From between the jagged horror of two clouds
Such a flood of moonlight as I've not seen since,
All the more glamorous for the blackness round it:
The full moon, mottled with its scarps and craters,
Afloat magnetic there, a globe so luminous
The luster reflected in my mother's eyes.
Then she breathed something eerie, breathed a breathless
Spell in my ear: to think what heaven must be
If the merest country moon could pulsate such
Profusion of treasure! Did she mean, let's move
From Nooley's into the moon's hallucination?
Enough of the bugs and rattlers, rusty nails?
Whatever she meant, some meaning haunts me yet
—Beglamored young, is one ever at home in the world?

IV

I discovered the same moon later in Leopardi.
Distilling the honey of sunlight to its candor,
It rose unclouded through his moody vapors,
Bringing no comfort, none: no mothering spell

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At cradle time left treasure for him. Treasure
Found is a longing lost; he kept his longing.
Still further back, through blinded vision Homer
Rejoiced in a windless moon. So all goes back
Past pyramid, cave painting, fossil footprint,
Back to deep time. The crust of the earth remembers
The carrousel of its animals in fracture,
Silurian wrack, Devonian wrack, the tar-pits,
Specters in carbon, amber; stranded hulls of
Iguanodons in the ginkgoes; bones embossed
Like the broken spokes of circus wheels; collected,
Some, in our cool museums;
                some, gone deeper
Than even the moon can touch, for all her fingering.

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PHILIP DACEY

The Deathbed Playboy

for Terry Bernhardt

My old man, dying, motioned I should lean
down close to him to catch his whispered wish:
"I want to see a *Playboy* magazine."
It was enough to make a grown son blush.
He was ninety-one. Retired from farming.
Iowa Republican and Catholic.
Was Hugh Hefner's monthly Princess Charming
to be his final angel? Did death trick
old men into confusing one striptease
with another: a bare breast with a soul
peeled out of its flesh? But I aimed to please.
He had the right to make himself a fool.

The family had gone home to eat. Perhaps
his waiting until now to tell me meant
this was to be our secret. Just two chaps
having a little fun. Father-son int-
imacy. Two on one. What a way to go!
The drugstore downstairs had a stack. Could this
have been standard procedure? Boost the flow
of adrenaline with skin. Better a kiss,
imagined or not, than more pills and shots.
I bought. I didn't tell the pretty girl
behind the counter my dad had the hots
for Miss June, or that Death wanted to curl
up with him. I just wished her a nice night
and went back to his room, bearing the mag
toward him like a priest with a last rite,
except I was thinking of Hef in drag
as Florence Nightingale. I hid my grin,
as if it would have made a difference:

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Pop was in and out of consciousness; even
awake, he seemed only flirting with sense.

Because his hands worked badly, like his tongue,
I helped him find the centerfold. Miss June,
red-haired and gifted, had at least one thing
in common with him: she was lying down.
And by a window, too, but old-gold light
streamed through hers in rapt attendance on her;
through his, half-light cowered to think of night
and all but ignored him; and while the flowers
by her left hip couldn't take their day's eyes
off her scandalous breasts, his bouquet was mum
about his chances and only exhaled sighs
of oxygen, limply. Tubes made him hum,
but her look clearly said, No strings attached.
Miss June was pure socialized medicine.

I couldn't read his face well as I watched
him take her in. His eyes traversed her skin
like manned snowshoes across a wintry plain,
awkward, slow, chilled. But he made the journey.
The while he did we didn't speak. My brain
was travelling at the speed of light, gone horny
with awe—at his strange request—and questions—
why, and why, and why. Maybe even he
didn't know. Bare truth lay behind bastions
of sheer cloth. Step up closer, Boys, and see.
Was this a farewell to Woman, her heft,
hearty, handsome, what once he hied to, wived?
Or the microbody of the earth itself,
home, rolling-hilled, deep-valleyed? Or the curved
universe laid dreamily out across vast space
like Mom at nursing time, milky, brimfull?
Or none of these, but simply the last trace
of an old girlfriend, never forgotten. Or all.

A nurse poked her head in. Everything okay?
I leaned to shield the folly. (Father's? Son's?)

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Just fine, thanks. Just a little deathbed play,
I didn't add. If she noticed our men's
club meeting in progress, she gave no sign,
a pro through and through, but only a dry smile,
then vanished, leaving us once more alone
with a simpler woman, two-dimensional,

whom I was still trying to complicate.
(The old boy had one long last leg to travel.)
She didn't ask for it, that someone make her
up—woman's body as another clean slate
for improving—but mentally I chalked, Acre:
if he could plow one more, he wouldn't die,
a lifetime's practice argued. Better Red—
(real name, Sue King) whose spread was obviously
a June field (jeune fille!) craving seed—than dead.
And then I saw the trick. Hers. She was It,
Death, the very thing, disguised as supple
and willing flesh, bedroom joy, youth, to flat-
ter him: We'd make such a lovely couple.
I shuddered: not only at the subterfuge
(imagined) but also at the sudden thought I
was a deathbed playboy, too; my younger age
meant nothing. I could see it in her eye:
Soon, she said. Soon I'll tire of him for you.
I knew her word was good. The Honest Woman.

Slowly he pushed her away, as if all through,
and looked up at me, a sound half low moan
and half speech on his lips. What did you say?
He tried again but swallowed every word.
Was that "thanks," "shanks," or "winks"? "hard," "bared," or
"bird"?
Then, just as I shrugged at him, who looked so alone
struggling to talk, a wave of pure dismay
engulfed me: what if I had earlier misheard?

What if his request to view a playmate
was intended to get himself a bed pan? a fluffed

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pillow? water? or his lost words did not
ask but gave: were a first: told how much he loved
his only son? And I had burdened him
with my madness? If so, he must have been no less
amazed than I at our trio like a dream.
And one of his last acts was therefore a kindness,
to humor me. Who was taking care of whom?
I wanted to cry and laugh and disappear
all at once. What I did, no doubt, was look dumb.
But he let nothing show—being either sheer
grace or just weak—except a sleepiness
he gave in to, or feigned, for my poor sake.
I was off the hook. I wanted to kiss
him, and so did, on the forehead, that quick
sanctuary of a dying man's last thoughts.
And better: imagined Red's ghost leaned out
of her picture to kiss him, too. Her spirit-
breasts swung like tower bells to celebrate
a life, and I liked her for her tender show
but shut the pages on her anyway
and bagged her, because I heard the family
coming back. They found me smoothing a sheet. How
was he? an uncle asked, and I said, Fair,
thinking of fair maidens and fair-haired boys.
Asleep—now, truly—he looked all innocence there
and ready for the sacrifice. No choice.
When someone suggested I take a break,
I went, smuggling Red out like contraband,
and headed for a bar. Scotch on the rocks,

which I lifted in salute to last stands
everywhere, and companions for that time.
The bartender joined in, who got paid to agree.
I bought the house drinks (a small crowd), no rhyme
or reason, just fool generosity.

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EMILY GROSHOLZ

Autumn Sonata

The ducks are raucous, flying overhead,
and all the talk you hear is running slower.
You don't quite get the words,

not yet, but you can estimate the music.
Anger makes you weep, and a good laugh
raises your toothless smile.

You stand to look, and listen as you sit
in the laps of people talking,
wondering what the tides of life can carry.

Your hair is soft as milkweed;
your father and I caress your head
whenever we hold you, half unthinkingly,

and you move up against that stroking hand.
Your body curves along us when you're full
and arches when you're hungry.

We speak to you by name
and you look sideways, willing but mystified,
trying hard to grasp at dancing straws,

to sing, to show, to answer, to remember
one by one the grape leaves as they tumble,
somber oak and yellow jewelweed.

And yet, for the most part, you soon forget.
And so I write this down

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so you can tell us later what it means.

My voluble, mute son,
who listen as the birds go storming south,
you know the melody, but not the words.

Rain or Shine

The squall is over. Clouds have swept away
their own long overtones and colors deepen
across the seascape: purple, turquoise, plum-green, high above
where the cliff rises, slanting rose and ochre.
The school for sailboats ventures out again,
a line of willful flower-sails, that breaks
and wanders from instruction, reconvenes
and puffs back into shore.

My pot of lavender on the balcony
keeps blossoming, and rustles in the wind
that rises like a question afterwards.
A weather-helicopter skirts the cape,
transmitting part of the answer I can see
with my own eyes to all the inland watchers:
"Clouds drift down the coast
to Monaco. Dream of a cool but sunny weekend."

Shelley wouldn't have stayed here. It's too cold
and changeable for a delicate *souffrant.*
Whitecaps on the sea, the mistral blowing
every other day, hardly a palm tree
flourishing anywhere, except in hotel baskets.
Only a year ago
winter frost brought down the eucalyptus
all over town, and left the apartments bald.
The baby's in a sweater, pants and socks,
though he won't wear a hat. Half-potentate,

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half-prisoner, he went off in the stroller
pushed by his musing father
whose pockets are full of tax returns and letters home.
Our letters tend to ramble; we're getting tired,
a little, of our long term in paradise
where no one speaks the language.

Don't want to live forever.
Don't want to climb the mountain, sail away
to Africa, fly high in a weather plane,
hop a freight to Paris.
Just want to rock my baby on my knee,
feed him when he's hungry, wait and see
the shape of blue that opens up between two clouds,
the boy's light silver and his father's gold.

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JOHN HOLLOWAY

Reveille

Nibble of the quiet mice
    of light at the curtains. Bold
whistle of that early
    morning songbird
    . . . the milkman;

and as those mice eat
    slowly into darkness, it seems
some slender crack in his bottle
    is letting white milk
    seep through the house;

save that milky dawn
    changes, little by little,
from milk to fire
    as a hot angry eye
    blinks open in the east,

and the songbird milkman's
    whistle is drowned in a roistering
melodious chorus; but I
    have another warmth . . . am turning
    back to it drowsily.

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ROBERT PHILLIPS

Baltimore & Ohio R. R.

for and after Stephen Dobyns

It's dead as a railspike, they say.
They even pulled up all the ties
from Wilmington to Virginia. Not even a freight
can get here anymore. Don't listen to such lies.

A certain kind of train still gets through.
The one that took young Tommy Waller
north to summer camp, Silver Lake, organized
sports. That season he grew three inches taller.

Or the train that brings "Grand" Mary south,
her annual visit, "Grand" Mary in the latest fashions,
red fox furs, hennaed hair, matching luggage,
in the Parlor Car, sipping Manhattans.

Her favorite grandchild, I was mesmerized
by her talk of the stock market, famous friends,
horse races, The Stork Club, Broadway . . .
I am as old now as she was then.

But that's the kind of passenger train gets through.
The one bringing Private First-Class Jack Studley home
from Manila, lots of medals but all in one piece.
He's met by Mom and Dad and Janet Lee Jones,

whom he will marry. You can't stop a train
like that. Or the one bearing LaVerne Purdy's
body. She ran off to Hollywood to become a star,
came home in a pine box, not yet thirty.

Then there's the train carrying The President and his wife.
It stopped on a side rail and we were under his spell

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while he spoke. Before TV, this was our only glimpse.
We liked him. "Give 'em hell, Harry!" we yelled.

That kind still comes through. They're dirty,
brass unpolished, seat cushions of prickly plush
explode dust clouds when you sit down. But
the conductor waves at me when the engine rushes

by and Laddie, my collie, still runs parallel
to the cars till the train is halfway to Bacon's Woods.
And if you have a very important letter to get through—
say, one declaring love to the one girl you should

have married but were too timid to ask—
the engine will stop beside the old mail sack poles,
snap up the sack, be on its way. Some even say
old Mister Register, the telegraph operator, is holed-

up inside the boarded train station. His ghostly
tappa-tappa-tap electrifies windless times,
recreating signals that don't seem to signify anymore.
Listen, I think I hear the eleven thirty-nine!

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ALLEN HOEY

Rose Moon

She told him she'd had his child
after the boy was born, the same time
she told him she was married. Not that they were
ever that kind of item—she just wanted him
to know—though she still recalled
the night it happened, talking about
Gurdjieffian octaves, and her
in her twenty-eighth year, and the
unfathomable ways whatever's meant to be
chooses us to let it be. The full moon broke
deep red over Rose Mountain. A blood moon—no,
a rose moon over Rose Mountain.
Then they were naked. She can't quite
remember how it happened, confusing that night
and the night she told her husband
she was pregnant and he offered to father
the child he couldn't give her. To father.
Both men's hands were soft the way a farmer's hands,
strong and callused, were soft when they stroked
milk from an udder. Cupping her breasts and sliding
down her arms raw from working the community farm.
Small hands. Almost lost when she stopped them
caressing her thighs and lifted them in hers
to kiss each knuckle. And his beard
—this was clear—not her husband's
weathered cheek. And when he came
not fireworks but a surprisingly sudden
sense of swelling, as if the tiny
displacement of cells dividing
pressed outward. And she said nothing.
As he grew, the boy startled her sometimes
the way a gesture—patting his hair in place—

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mimicked his father . . . confusing word:
which was father, giver of the single cutting
or the man who pruned and coaxed it
to a vital rose? Spit and image
of a man he'd met a dozen times, spent
a single afternoon with at an amusement park,
against her husband's easing him, voice
soft and slow, when the boy's eyes narrowed in anger,
tears spraying like rain off a shaking dog,
or the way the blue veins at his temples
throbbed when he was nabbed by thought,
and, even as a youngster, how his small hands
caressed, moments of unexpected
tenderness, knuckles down her cheek and around
her chin. The way, no matter how
thoroughly you cultivate a field, thistles
burst up in bean rows. Those times
shocked her with an intensity
of satisfaction, how the boy was a multiple
exposure of them all, but no part
blurred, an impossible accident
come true. "It's just that moon," she'd say,
laughing, loving him the more
—could it be?—and the other still,
and her husband none the less,
"that old rose moon that's left its mark."

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SARAH M. BROWNSBERGER

For Posterity

Chandler's Pond, August

Day after day with my tiny daughter
I enter the meadow by the pond
and we see how everything has changed
under the light and the weather.
We two know that our galaxy is turning,
that the human brain is a cylinder
to gather starlight into one gaze,
and that grace is time repeating itself
for our slow minds. All this
we have learned in our first year
together. So much the smell of her hair
has taught me, and her brilliance
as she considers the motes of dust. Soon
she will no longer need me like this
and the boredom of progress will return.
My days will be relegated to calendar pages
and my labor to accomplishments.
See, baby, the ducks are molting.
Big gulls stole their ducklings;
that's why they're sad. Look how each tree
mulls over the rain, long after the sky
has cleared. See how hopeless
my love is, empty-handed as the grass.
All this comes unbidden, again and again.
When your purposes are as a foreign language
to the cool radiance of morning,
will you remember that in your mother tongue
you heard ripples over pebbles as 'love, love'?
We'll come again tomorrow.

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Chandler's Pond, December

Like the shift of the sun toward winter,
a new remove has appeared in your gaze.
Your eyes have paled, your chin has set.
Behind you the evergreens bow and clap.
Your breath steams ambition.
Just last month I knew what was passing
between us, but now we are aloft in history;
the currents are wordless, and the words
are not synchronized to meaning.
You throw bits of bread on the frozen grass
and speak the duck language.
You are the mistress; ducks waddle below.
I am a boulder beside you, hulking
windbreaker. My hands are boulder children,
still and ruddy by a wall of rushes.
Gulls circle, aggressive beggars.
Sleep till the light, I want to tell you,
or you will learn want. But you already know.
For this reason you cling to my breasts,
and leave bread to birds, long after
the craving of birth has relaxed from your lips.
You already know. You cling to me
because you know we are parted.

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TED KOOSER

Snake Skin

It is only the old yellow shell
of something long gone on,
a dusty tunnel echoing
with light, yet you can feel
the speed along it, feel
in your bones the tick of wheels.

You hold a glove of lace,
a loose glitter of sequins.
The ghost of a wind is in it still,
for someone only yesterday
was waving it: goodbye.

Somewhere, a long train
crosses a border. The sun lights lamps
in its thousand round windows.
All it knows is behind it already.
Nothing it knows is ahead.
Its whistle flicks into the distance.

The Back Door

The door through which we step out
into the past is an easy push,
as light as the air, a green screen door
with a sagging spring. There's a hook
to unhook first, for there have been
incidents: someone has come up
out of the past to steal something good

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from the present. We know who they are.
We have tried to discourage them
by moving from house to house,
from city to city, but they find us
again and again. You see them coming
sometimes from a long ways off—
a pretty young woman, a handsome man,
stepping in through the back garden gate,
pausing to pick the few roses.

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JOHN LOUGHERY

The Fate of the Avant-Garde

ONCE THE DAMAGE HAS BEEN TALLIED UP—whether it's the result of the bone-ignorant agitation of the Jesse Helms/Donald Wildmon camp or the slick, lucrative cynicism promulgated by art-world luminaries like David Salle, Peter Halley, and the Whitney curatorial staff—the conclusion that the visual arts have not had any easy time of it in recent years is unavoidable. Add to this situation, on the one hand, the imminent prospect of more budget slashing, museum cutbacks, and gallery closings. Then, on the other, consider (because no one else in the art world is) the smothering growth of more acousti-guides and poster reproductions that demean the images and the experiences we are being offered in our museums. And just what do we imagine will be left of the art form to believe in at century's end?

Yet reminders of the power of oil on canvas, pen on paper, and sculpted metal, wood, or stone can come to us from unexpected quarters. In almost every continent today, most visibly at the moment in Latin America, artists deal with reactions to their work that go beyond the denial of an endowment grant or a senator's jibe. The stifling of artistic expression, particularly when the art is satirical or political, is a fact of life, attesting to the potential of painting and sculpture, like novels and plays, to make a difference in the world. Robert Lowell's much-derided comment on the Soviet Union's attitude toward its poets (i.e., at least they take them seriously enough to imprison them) was in spirit addressing an important issue, however open his words were to misunderstanding. Dictatorial governments and benighted politicians don't pay attention to anything they consider marginal or effete; they seek to contain that which is potent, still meaningful to large numbers of people, and provocative.

"'Degenerate Art': The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany," the summer exhibition at the Chicago Art Institute, was an emotionally stirring look at one of the most notorious instances of that official fear and hatred: the Third Reich's "Entartete Kunst" show of 1937. In that dark year, the Nazis systematically purged their nation's museums of 16,000 artworks, 650 of which they displayed in one huge, brutal show in Munich (the show then traveled over a four-year period) designed to ridicule modern art and glorify the aesthetic ideals of National Socialism. The Chicago exhibition, which originated at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art but didn't travel to the East Coast, aimed to recreate the spirit of this attack on modern

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painting, to remind us both of what was lost and what was saved from that nightmare time, and to reaffirm our *need* for the kind of work that artists like Max Beckmann and Emil Nolde, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Otto Dix, Bertolt Brecht and Arnold Schönberg have left us.

The design of this installation was part of its meaning, even more emphatically than is usually the case. Before entering the galleries displaying the artworks, viewers were presented with a skillful form of sensory overload, the brainchild of architect Frank O. Gehry, that prepared us in a particular way for what was to follow. Documentary films of Joseph Goebbels' speeches, the book burnings, and parades, and vitrines packed with books and brochures—the propaganda of Nazi hate—quickly established a feel for the social context in which it was possible for a country to turn against its own best artists. A twenty-two-foot scale model of the original "Entartete Kunst" hall was arranged at eye level to provide a glimpse of the calculated style of picture-hanging the Nazis employed—cramming paintings together, decorating the walls with derisive slogans and captions, listing purchase prices on the walls as if to inform the German public of the misuse of its public funds. (Does that tactic ring a bell circa 1989-91?) Most effective of all, for this writer, was a room given over to earphone tapes of various émigrés describing their experiences of fleeing their homeland and of the music of the era, from *Threepenny Opera* ballads sung by Brecht himself to the atonalism of Webern and Schönberg.

The works of art on view at the Art Institute in the seven succeeding galleries included some famous and expected paintings and a fair sampling from the lesser-known category. The stylized, tortured forms of Max Beckmann—pinched faces and searing eyes—George Grosz's red-hot *Metropolis*, Oskar Schlemmer's geometric figures, Oskar Kokoschka's weightier, more tactile, paint-gouged people, and Kirchner's city crowds were some exciting examples of the former, but it was no less appealing to see works like Xaver Fuhr's enchanting *Cafe Terrace* (1928) or Ludwig Meidner's ecstatic self-portrait of 1912 that were completely new to me. That these artists were, for the most part, recognized as worth collecting by the museum curators of Weimar days is a testament to the discernment of men like Ludwig Justi, Fritz Wichert, and Gustav Hartlaub—museum personnel far in advance of their American and British counterparts when it came to understanding the goals of creative young people tired of realism and Impressionism. "Degenerate Art" was, then, on one pleasing level a solid German Expressionism show, affording an opportunity Americans haven't had since the Guggenheim's 1979 survey to study the original source of today's—generally lackluster—Neo-Expressionists.

But politics was not far from anyone's mind here, not with Goebbels and the bonfires at the entrance, and in many ways the spirit of Emil

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Nolde was the dominant one of the show. If my quick count was accurate, he was represented by more works than any other artist; certainly some of the finest paintings at the Art Institute were his. (Nolde was also the subject of a play by Tom Jacobson, likewise entitled *Degenerate Art*, that was playing in Chicago when I was there. While a little short on dramatic momentum, Jacobson's biographical play was still an attention-holding account of the era from the painters' point of view.) Nolde's tragedy, different from that of Beckmann or Kirchner, was two-fold: not only was he a victim of Nazi persecution, but he was an unwitting participant in the barbarism in its early stages. An anti-Semite and believer in the great racial "cause" of his people, he embraced the nationalism of Hitler's party and did pretty well for himself when the Nazis first came to power. Before long, though, the situation had changed—how politically naive Emil Nolde must have been not to realize that his Expressionist style of painting was going to get him into trouble, regardless of his party membership and regardless of his own view of his content. By 1941 he was under house arrest, forbidden to paint, dazed by his own stupidity, but not quite broken in spirit. He continued to work, secretly and productively, in watercolor, thereby avoiding the incriminating odor of oil paint.

The Noldes to be seen in Chicago are among the most amazing works of modern art for an essentially narrow and conservative man to have produced. *Mulatto* (1913), *Nudes and Eunuch* (1912), and the spectacular *Russian II* (1914) are raw and painterly in a vein that goes far beyond Gauguin. The application of so much thick, bright oil to the canvas has an almost sexual quality to it, irrespective of the painting's subject, while Nolde's interest in forsaking academic correctness for the robustness of the tribal and the "primitive" resulted in some of the most unusual crucifixions, resurrections, and nativity scenes in the history of art. Yet what is fascinating in the religious pictures is the way in which all of this flamboyant color and dynamic, idiosyncratic brushwork does *not* yield a simple-minded joyousness. There is a sense of sadness and menace behind almost everything Nolde painted, an edge that's mesmerizingly neurotic. The simple, elegant landscapes do even more with this mood or undercurrent of energetic melancholy. *Hultoft Farmhouse* of 1932 evokes a rural home and its surrounding trees and buildings in the lower left-hand corner of the canvas with a minimum of detail, while a monstrous, ominous sky of blue-black and pale orange dwarfs the farmer's property and even the open land (a band of green in the foreground) surrounding the farm. In color and composition, all of Nolde's landscapes suggest larger, not necessarily benign forces at work over human destiny. But to stare at the horizontal *Hultoft Farmhouse* across the length of a gallery with Wilhelm Lehmbruck's elongated *Large Kneeling Woman* next to it was to feel, guided by sharp curatorial choices in the

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hanging like this one, the anguished *Weltanschauung* that the exhibition wanted to register.

For that matter, this whole show might also be taken as an elegy for a lost age as much as it was a political or art-historical statement, a reminder of a time when a Modernist "avant-garde" was still a force that meant something, an entity that had battles to fight and clear-cut enemies to engage—enemies over whom it ultimately triumphed.

In our time, the Whitney Biennial purports to be the official register of the avant-garde. Obviously, a no-win situation: everyone's list of who should or shouldn't be included in this every-other-year show will differ, sometimes radically. But the regular attempt to survey the new work of the previous twenty-four months, especially given the lack of interest New York's other major museums have in contemporary art, is an important task, and so two cheers for the Whitney for forging ahead. The problem with this usually unloved exhibition is of a dual nature. On the one hand, the curators (always the same bunch, this time with a few national advisors thrown in) tend to stick to the beaten path and follow the lead that a handful of dealers, collectors, and magazine editors provide. Good luck to the truly talented or innovative young artist who hasn't been recognized yet by *ArtNews* or *Artforum* or one of the "right" two-dozen SoHo or midtown galleries. Perhaps this will change now that Tom Armstrong is gone and a new director, David Ross, takes charge. But the deeper trouble involves the idea that a true "cutting edge" in the arts, a genuine avant-garde, still exists that needs to be honored and advanced by the Whitney in the face of—of what? A reactionary Academy? A world of conservative collectors? Sorry, that won't wash. The result is usually an extravaganza of trendiness at Madison & 75th, the advancement of a bottomless cliché: the Whitney must seek out that new work which is novel and "daring," vehemently timely and anti-traditional, rather than merely splendidly made and intellectually serious.

So, to get on with it, what were we offered this time? More, I thought, than we had any right to expect. It was good to see the surreal, expertly painted tableaux of Joseph Santore included this year, along with Alan Rath's weird but alluring video sculptures, Rona Pondick's oddball constructions, and—above all else—Richard Misrach's photographs. (Misrach's "Desert Cantos" series is one of the significant accomplishments of our time; the half-buried cattle, the waste sites, the discarded copies of *Playboy* rent by bullet holes that he's found across the southwest and photographed so skillfully are our version of Beckmann's truths.) Yes, it's unpleasant at the Whitney to have our noses rubbed in the same old trough, the HalleySalleKoons pit, and it's unfortunate that Eric Fischl, who is in a slump these days, should be included—as if to say who will notice the difference between his best work of the early eighties and these sterile new

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paintings from India, anyway? But, and this is the best sign of all, there were actually some names and works at the Whitney that an art-conscious New Yorker might not know. In other words, somebody decided to see what was doing in other cities, other states.

As usual, there was a kind of grudging and even belated inclusion of artists working in more traditional media (i.e., serious, non-ironic painting rather than mixed-media or Conceptual Art) that made for some odd effects. Rebecca Purdum and Ellen Phelan, for instance, are talented nature-based abstract artists, but their works at the Whitney were far from the most dynamic or memorable paintings they have created in the last five years; the appropriate Biennial year for each would have been 1987, and—the sad point here—no one unfamiliar with their achievements was apt to walk away with the satisfying feeling of having discovered an exciting new artist to keep track of. The bottom line remains: painting and sculpture are marginal art forms today in the eyes of the Whitney curatorial staff, worthy of attention when we are talking about the generation of Ellsworth Kelly and Joan Mitchell, or when they come to us by way of one or two key dealers like Boone or Sonnabend, but not central to the culture when talking about the work being done by independent people in their twenties and thirties.

The Whitney has done a good job over the last ten years in training its audience to see things its way. Standing in front of Rebecca Purdum's abstraction the first day of the exhibition, a young woman near me commented to a friend, "Such a conservative show this time . . . I mean, so much painting." Lesson learned, point made.

The Ad Reinhardt retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art last summer was an immersion in a system of beliefs from another time and another mind-set altogether, a way of seeing the world that not many people share any more—if they ever did.

A crankier and more dogmatic American artist, a man with more strong opinions and less tolerance for other approaches to art, has never existed. And it probably had to be that way: Reinhardt understood the stakes involved when accommodating to popular taste, art-world dictates, or what he saw as a misguided pluralism. In any case, thanks to the blown-up cartoons that lined the walls of the entrance to the lower galleries at MoMA, we got a quick look at just what the painter did and did not approve of in the world of contemporary art. In these hilarious and insightful drawings, Reinhardt pokes fun—brutal fun—at those who would make of art a business, a club, an expression of psychology or personality, or a vehicle for social, political, historical, or journalistic ends. His 1946 drawing *How to Look at Modern Art in America* shows a tree, its roots labeled "Cézanne," "Seurat," "Van Gogh," and "Gauguin," with its trunk marked "Braque," "Matisse," "Picasso." The few healthy branches are covered with leaves named for those painters, like Mark

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Rothko and Clyfford Still, who practiced the aesthetic integrity Reinhardt demanded. Most of the tree, though, is in bad shape, loaded down as it is with an iron weight marked "Subject Matter," its puny leaves named after most of the major names in figurative painting. Fifteen years later Reinhardt drew the same tree for an *ArtNews* illustration: by then, in his bitter view, an advanced state of decay had set in. Little remained of its original glory. A pure artistic experience no longer existed. Even the painters of the New York School had sold out, according to Ad Reinhardt, who loathed the mythology of "Action Painting," art-talk about line and texture, and soupy mysticism.

At this late date, even the most casual museum-goer is used to the exhibition in which we watch an abstract artist's "evolution." We see the early, brilliant representational drawings, the first expressionist or surrealist oils, the gradual dissolution of forms as he or she advances toward one mode or another of abstract purity. Not so at the Reinhardt retrospective, where we confronted that rarest of things: the man who knew from the start that he had no interest in recreating mundane visible realities on canvas. The earliest paintings, like the more austere later ones, are made up of marks of paint, often plainly vertical or horizontal, without any allusions to nature, society, other art, or anything else you could think of. So all we think about *is* the painting, at first a bit varied in its colors and gradually more restrained in its chromatic variety. We proceeded from these first rooms to those that contain the all-blue and all-red paintings, conscious that we were watching a journey akin to that which Samuel Beckett was later to chart with his plays—a movement into a paradoxically affirming, physically exhilarating, ballast-free territory where the operative words are "not," "without," and "alone."

The final gallery at MoMA was devoted, of course, to the famous all-black paintings—twenty of them. This is the way they are best seen, en masse, not by isolated, pointless examples sandwiched in between Pollock's drips and Rothko's blurs. Here, if anywhere, they are meant to work their spell. (Unfortunately, the show's curators weren't interested in having their patrons spend any length of time in this room, as they decline to provide even an unobtrusive, minimalist bench for us—an annoying fact given William Rubin's apt remark in the catalogue that "the person who 'does' the Ad Reinhardt retrospective at three miles an hour will literally not see it." But perhaps rigor is the order of the day and we are being instructed to stand for the half hour we might want to stay in the room.) Having the whiteness of the wall extend a short distance out onto the floor, creating a kind of counter/splash-back effect, was a good idea, too, given the subtle chromatic shifts of the paintings, the echoes of purple and gray. Now, in fact, I can't say that I have ever felt before a Reinhardt what I have before a great Mark Rothko: that reverberation, that extra-aesthetic impact, that this painting is designed to

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awaken in us and that writers like Dore Ashton and Lucy Lippard have described. But what anyone should be able to feel, given an open mind, is delight in the visual play of shadows of color within color, of the work's insistence on the viewer's need to slow down to search and focus, and respect for the clarity and seriousness the artist brings to his art form. The last gleam of light on the last head in the last urn: Beckett again.

Reading about Reinhardt in the catalogue and spending time with these paintings leaves one with the impression of a man for whom—long before anyone else—the whole postwar notion of an "avant-garde" had become a suspect property. Ad Reinhardt was intent on avoiding any kind of institutionalization, any hint of a comfortable group identity. Just as surely as he would have been banned by the Nazi philistines in the thirties, so he would have been overlooked by the Biennial scouts fifty years later. The fate of those individuals in the arts who are difficult, truculent, confident, and single-minded, who have no use for timeliness, hasn't really changed.

Brief notes . . . summer wanderings: Arguably the best European painter at work today in the traditional sense of the term (which omits artists like Anselm Kiefer and Antoni Tapies), Frank Auerbach was the subject of a small, sumptuous exhibition at Yale's Center for British Art in June. Its focus was the painting *To the Studios*, recently acquired by the St. Louis Art Museum, and 65 lively preparatory sketches for that picture. The dozen or so paintings brought to New Haven to give a sense of Auerbach's range included some haunting pictures by this odd, persistent, inspiring man who seems obsessed with ever-thicker ridges and crusts of painting. . . . "Mark Tansey: Art and Source" m[illegible]ast-Coast appearance at M. I. T.'s List Center for the Visual Arts. [illegible] was an examination of four of Tansey's witty, allusive representational paintings—*Mont Sainte-Victoire, White on White, The Bricoleur's Daughter* and *The History of Modernist Painting*—by way of the many sketches and studies that led up to those works which were so popular in SoHo in the eighties. Sour is the man who doesn't like a good pun or who wouldn't enjoy catching the "in" postmodernist references these pictures are built on (e.g., Jacques Derrida on the shore watching bathers beneath the Provence peak in *Mont Sainte-Victoire*), but the fact that so much has been made of Tansey's skill in this regard is more telling about the state of the art world than most of us would like to admit. In this too-small show, Tansey came across as a symptom more than an analyst of his narrow times. . . . Across the Charles River, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts continues to maintain its position as the preeminent center in America for the study of nineteenth-century French art. "Paris Pleasures: Daumier to Picasso" was a feast of images in all media evoking the best of that city in the days of the Third Republic. . . . Finally the Robert Stackhouse exhibition at the Delaware Art Museum was probably the most

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satisfying union of art-work and art-space of the year. The 1987 addition to the museum in Wilmington is a spacious, light-saturated marvel, an architectural object-lesson in what can be done in a pragmatic, un-grandiose vein. Stackhouse's seductive metal sculptures of tents, caves, and passageways were shown to great advantage there, while his huge red and blue watercolors of ship hulls and snakes shedding their skins allowed what was on the walls to complement the objects on the floors in ways that were both subtle and forceful. For an artist interested in themes of enclosure, coverings, transformation, and the re-emergence of new forms, this was an unmatchable exhibition: the perfect visual experience of Stackhouse's primeval and mythological explorations.

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RICHARD HORNBY

Theatre in Southern California

When the movie industry began in America in the early twentieth century, it was based in New York City, the obvious place since it was the theatre center. If a rural location was required, there were plenty just a short trip away; Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery*, and the westerns of Bronco Billy Anderson, were filmed in the wilds of New Jersey. Then, in 1913, the Jesse Lasky film company decided it would be nice to make a film with some real western scenery. They accordingly dispatched Cecil B. DeMille to Flagstaff, Arizona, but when the director and crew got there, so the story goes, it was raining, so they continued on to the Los Angeles area, where there was plenty of sunshine almost all year round. They set up operations in a barn in a cheap rural area called Hollywood. Before long, other filmmakers followed, until Hollywood was no longer cheap nor rural.

This geographical bifurcation of the theatre and film industries in the United States has had profound negative consequences for our theatre. In other countries, film and theatre stayed in one place. Sunlight soon became unnecessary for making films; with improvements in electric lighting and in film speeds, even Hollywood moved indoors much of the time. Major film industries developed in Berlin, London, Moscow, Paris, and Rome, which were also their countries' theatre capitals. This meant that actors and directors could make movies while continuing to perform on stage; it was, and still is, even possible in those countries to shoot movie scenes during the day and be in a play the same evening.

For over fifty years, many of our best stage actors have been lured from New York to Hollywood, most of them never to return. It is interesting to recall that Marlon Brando, for example, had a noteworthy record in the 1940s on the New York stage, where he received his greatest acclaim not, as you might think, for Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, but for Marchbanks in Shaw's *Candida*. In addition to becoming a great film actor, he might have become a great classical stage actor as well. The huge salaries and easy life of Southern California depleted the ranks of major New York theatre companies like the Mercury Theatre and the Group Theatre, and became a cause of their demise.

Conversely, actors whose careers began in film had little opportunity to do stage acting. There were few professional theatres in Southern California, and besides, acting in theatres was looked down

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on, because it advertised that you were not in a movie at the time. Thus, American movie stars have not developed the skills needed to act on stage, especially in the classics, as has been painfully obvious in the ongoing Shakespeare Marathon at the New York Shakespeare Festival. Stage acting is harder than film acting (though film acting is not just the same thing only sloppier; it has its own techniques that must be learned), but also, because of the longer rehearsal periods and repeated performances, it provides opportunities for more subtlety and complexity in characterization. As Michael Caine has said, plays are performed, while movies are only *made*.

In recent years, the theatre situation in Southern California has been changing. Fewer films are actually made there; a film planned in a Hollywood office may be shot in New York or Florida or even Russia. (The old-time movie moguls hated to make films on location, beyond their control, but modern communication means that day-to-day command can be maintained over film crews anywhere, and shooting on location is often much cheaper than in union-dominated Hollywood.) Actors have become more independent, and typically make fewer films than in the old days; there is no longer any stigma in taking time off to be in a play. Most important, the number of professional theatres in the Los Angeles area has grown expeditiously in the past two decades. There are major theatre complexes at the Mark Taper Forum at the Music Center of Los Angeles County (which is like the Lincoln or Kennedy Centers, on a more human scale), or the Los Angeles Theatre Center in downtown L.A., plus literally dozens of other theatres. If you don't mind an hour or two of driving (and if you come to Southern California, you'd better not mind it), there are also major theatres outside Los Angeles County, like the South Coast Repertory in Costa Mesa, or the Old Globe Playhouse in San Diego. Discounting Broadway, and its Los Angeles equivalent, there is more theatre in the area now than in New York.

In August, the Mark Taper Forum presented the world premiere of Ariel Dorfman's *Widows*, an earnest piece dealing with Chile under the recent, brutal regime of General Augusto Pinochet. One of the worst evils of that government was the practice, common to many totalitarian countries, of "disappearing" people—arresting and murdering them, all the while disavowing the arrests or any knowledge of the individuals. The relatives are denied even their loved ones' bodies.

In the foreground of the play is a struggle between two army officers sent to develop a rural valley after a recent civil war. Both are tough individuals who have employed ruthless tactics in the past, but in this instance the Captain, of middle-class, professional background, prefers the carrot of a new fertilizer factory to pacify the region, while his cynical lieutenant, an aristocrat with important political connections, insists on using the stick of more terror.

In the background to the officers' personal struggle are the women of the valley, who are like a chorus in a Greek tragedy. All of their

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men have disappeared, apparently without a trace. One day, however, a body is washed up from the river, so battered and decayed that it is impossible to identify. The Lieutenant, acting against orders, simply burns the body, and intimidates the woman who insists it is that of her dead father. When another body is washed up, the Captain adopts a more clever tactic; when a woman comes to claim it, he sets up a rival claimant, who maintains that it is that of her husband, who died in a drunken accident.

The fact that the bodies are all but unrecognizable and can be claimed by almost anybody leads the women to a clever ploy of their own: 36 widows all claim to recognize the corpse, and demand it for burial. They demonstrate with bonfires until finally the Captain, under increasing political pressure, orders them slaughtered.

Despite the simple, austere plot outline, with its echoes of *Antigone* and *The Trojan Women, Widows* has an episodic sprawl. Adapted from Dorfman's novel by the author and Tony Kushner, the play remains too novelistic in structure, with many slow, loosely connected incidents, including an odd scene in a wealthy villa that is completely different in tone from the rest of the play. It occurs too late to be an effective counterpoint, and spoils the previously developed feeling of a ruthless power structure operating invisibly. The Captain is a well-developed, complex character, and his relationship with the Lieutenant is interesting because his supposed underling is actually more powerful than he, but the Lieutenant himself is a villainous stereotype, the man you love to hate, as are the aristocrats in the villa scene. The women are stolid, peasant folk; since they lack an articulate spokeswoman like Antigone in Sophocles' play or Hecuba in *Trojan Women*, their only force is one of sheer inertia. No one could deny the sincerity of the play, or the importance of its message, but it needs fewer scenes, with more development and complication within them, and more sharply developed conflicts.

Douglas Stein designed a fine set for the production, with low tiers of sand and rocks providing a wonderful desert ambience. The sense of locale was enhanced by the music and sound design by Jan A. P. Kaczmarek, using the stunning new audio mixing of "Qsound," to give a realistic spatial quality to sounds of the river, thunder, and rainfall. The performers were particularly good at relating to all this, so that, despite the abstract setting, we were always vividly aware of the river, the dust, the green fields, the heat.

In general, the acting in the production reflected the strengths and weaknesses in the script: Tony Plana was forceful and varied as the Captain, while Robert Beltran was monotonously offensive as the Lieutenant, as were the aristocrats in their scene. Similarly, the large cast of village women were endlessly lugubrious. Some of the blame for the heaviness of the production must fall on the director, Robert Egan, who might have helped his actors find more variety rather than push for stereotypes, and who certainly should have paced them

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faster. Slow cues and constant pausing were the norm, so that the actors seemed to be wallowing in their individual sorrows rather than moving the play along. Unlike film, the stage will not tolerate even the slightest pause in speech or action unless there is a powerful reason for one. In the end, we got a ponderous production of an all too somber play.

The Los Angeles Theatre Center in downtown L.A. has four pleasant performance spaces in the former Security Bank building. Built in 1916, when a bank had to look like a fortress rather than a health spa, it still has vaults in the basement, next to the restrooms. The impression of financial stability is an illusion, however, as the L.A.T.C. has staggered from one economic crisis to the next in recent months, with a series of closings averted by emergency fund drives. One problem is that they are an adventuresome theatre group, something like La Mama/E.T.C. in New York, maintaining a relatively expensive operation in their big marble facility.

I would hate to see the L.A.T.C. go under, but it was hard to shed a tear for the possible demise of their late summer offering, Reza Abdoh's performance art piece, *Bogeyman*. Vaguely concerned with AIDS, it was a homoerotic extravaganza, with multiple scenes taking place simultaneously on a three-storied set designed by Timian Alsaker. If you like a lot of prancing and shouting, explosions, sado-masochistic garb, more male nudity than in a Y.M.C.A. locker room, scatological imagery, simulated homosex, whipping, infibulation, and simulated castration, then this was the play for you. But maybe not—Abdoh did toss in one nude female, perhaps as a sop to us male heterosexuals, but she was presented in such a way that, although basically an attractive woman, she seemed just as disgusting as the rest of the performers. Thus I suspect that even aficionados of whips and chains might have been less than thrilled by this strident, self-righteous, manipulative piece.

In other words, *Bogeyman* displayed all the heavy-handedness that is typical of "performance art." For all the apparent wildness, the production was very tightly controlled and carefully, if monotonously, paced. Even though Abdoh was not physically present, we were constantly aware of the director ordering people about, to try to shock and dazzle us. One of the amazing things about a true work of art is that it has what Susanne K. Langer called "virtual life"; even though we know that it was created by an artist, it seems to live on its own. Iago was Shakespeare's creation, but he seems autonomous and alive, operating according to his own wishes rather than Shakespeare's. But the characters in *Bogeyman*, and the actors who played them, had no independence. They were willing pawns of the genius-director; if any had left the cast, his replacement would have performed exactly the same way, since, indeed, they all performed exactly like one another,

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with each line shouted (and amplified!) at breakneck speed, without the slightest intonation or sense of meaning.

Bogeyman was nasty, brutish, and short (about 90 minutes), but seemed to go on forever. I looked at my watch at 8:30 and could not believe that I had been there only half an hour; it felt like half a lifetime. I suppose it could be considered daring to mount a production like this at a time of possible bankruptcy, and expect audiences to brave the muggers, panhandlers, and drug dealers of downtown L.A. in order to pay twenty-eight dollars apiece to see it. It could also be considered both artistically and financially stupid.

South Coast Repertory in Costa Mesa has an excellent track record with Shaw, which is unusual for an American theatre company. Although I have seen some of the individual roles played better, the South Coast staging of *Heartbreak House* was the best overall production I have ever seen of that difficult, dark masterpiece. Director Martin Benson, whose production of *Misalliance* swept the Los Angeles Drama awards four years ago, has a classy sense of period and style, and can orchestrate Shaw's complicated speeches and actions wonderfully. With *Heartbreak House*, begun in 1913 but revised during the First World War, Shaw was influenced by the Russian plays of Chekhov, Gorki, and Tolstoy, with their estate settings, large ensemble casts, and deep undercurrents of feeling and action beneath a surface of apparently aimless chit-chat. Plays of this sort are the supreme test of a stage director (though if the result is a success the audience members are mostly unaware of the director's hand), because, unlike most crowd scenes, where one or two, or at most three, principal characters play off against an undifferentiated mass, with these plays there are often six or eight characters on stage who must each be fully individualized, yet blended into a whole. The focus is constantly shifting, so that the director has to make you look where you are supposed to, without your being aware that your gaze is being carefully led around the stage. The surface chatter must be well-spoken and clear, yet the sense of hidden action must be omnipresent.

What happens in *Heartbreak House*? A bunch of indolent aristocrats, mostly relatives, gather at the home of Captain Shotover, a retired ship captain who now invents weapons. They chat, drink tea, flirt, quarrel. A middle-aged industrialist, "Boss" Mangan, is engaged to the young heroine, Ellie Dunn, whose father Mangan has ruined. In one scene, she literally hypnotizes him. In another, a burglar intrudes, but ends up gaining everybody's sympathy. Instead of marrying Mangan, Ellie weds eighty-eight-year-old Shotover, in a quick, offstage, self-administered ceremony. Then, a Zeppelin drops bombs on the estate, killing Mangan and the burglar, who have taken refuge in a gravel pit, but leaving everyone else unscathed. The speeches are as loony and disjointed as the action, almost a parody of Shaw's usual rhetorical brilliance. Yet underneath it all Shaw foresees all the evils

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of the twentieth century—war (though there is no actual mention of the war going on in Europe at the time), upheaval, Western decline, loss of faith, exploitation, economic depression, tyranny, even the atom bomb. "Can't you think of something that will murder half Europe at one bang?" Mrs. Hushabye asks Shotover.

The settings of the production, by my talented University of California colleague John Iacovelli, fulfilled the tricky responsibility of looking like both a house and a ship, and had a fine, eighteenth-century look, which was interesting for this play, a dialogue between England's past and present. Shigeru Yaji's costumes were so resplendent as sometimes to seem overwhelming. The acting ranged from solid to brilliant. Having seen the likes of Diana Rigg, Rosemary Harris, and Kate Nelligan in the female leads in the past, I found Frances Conroy as Mrs. Hushabye, Kandis Chappell as Lady Utterword, and Devon Raymond as Ellie Dunn, all a bit tame. Also, Conroy has a shrill voice, and Raymond also tends toward shrillness in emotional moments. But Richard Doyle was the best Boss Mangan I have ever seen, and Hal Landon, Jr., the best Mazzini Dunn, Ellie's dazed, bankrupt father.

At the center of the production, and the main reason for its success, was the matchless Paxton Whitehead in the role of Shotover. Whitehead, former director of the Shaw Festival in Canada, is the best Shavian actor in the world. He has a rich baritone voice and perfect diction, which are so important for such a verbal playwright, but more important are his sense of ease on stage, his impeccable timing, and his ability to attack with a line like a striking cobra. It is very important in acting not only to understand the meaning of a line, but to know its intent, which with Shaw is usually to shock or amaze somebody. Philosophical though Shaw may be, his characters never merely spout his ideas for their own sake, but rather to have some effect on the other characters, which is what makes Shaw a philosophical playwright, and not (like, say, Sartre) a playwriting philosopher.

I have been a fan of Whitehead for over twenty years, once even writing a play with him in mind for the lead. Having seen him as Hector Hushabye in *Heartbreak House* productions in three different countries, I assumed he was going to play the role again, but was delighted to learn that he was now moving up to Shotover. The only trouble with him as Hector was that he usually dominated the play, whereas it is Shotover (though he is actually on stage less than Hector) who should dominate, embodying the life force that Shaw felt was draining out of England. Hector is a dreamer and a dabbler, while Shotover, the former sea captain, is a doer.

Whitehead is both a dreamer and a doer; the Shaw Festival has suffered from his absence. Now that he is at South Coast, I can only hope to see him there in many other Shavian roles.

George Kelly, the uncle of the late Princess Grace, was an American

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playwright of considerable skill. Satires of the American middle class, his plays, to quote the *Cambridge Guide to World Theatre*, are "tart, scolding, droll, and delightfully eccentric." His best plays, all written in the twenties, are *The Torchbearers*, a hilarious backstage look at amateur theatrics; *Craig's Wife*, a serious psychological study that won a Pulitzer Prize; and *The Show Off*, about a clash between a commonsensical mother and her loudmouth son-in-law.

The Old Globe Theatre in San Diego presented a fine production of *The Show Off* in September, perfectly capturing the darkly comic tone of the piece. Aubrey Piper, the title character, is a wonderfully recognizable American type, related to Sinclair Lewis' Babbitt or Elmer Gantry, a brash, lying braggart with a neighing laugh (usually at his own bad jokes), who nonetheless manages to be endearing. His mother-in-law can't stand him, but most people are caught up by his charm, and his wife loves him to distraction.

The characters are so well observed (the subtitle of the play is "A Transcript of Life in Three Acts") that *The Show Off* seems like a period piece about the twenties, even though it was written at the time. It contains a number of somber elements—including an automobile accident and the father's death from a stroke—and the mother's disgust with Aubrey is unrelenting, yet the play is definitely a comedy, often a hilarious one. The final twist, in which the show off finally, surprisingly, triumphantly achieves one of his boasts, is a delight.

Jack O'Brien adroitly directed the Old Globe production in their indoor proscenium theatre, a pleasing, traditional performance space with a wide stage and auditorium. (They have two other theatres, including an outdoor one where they have been doing Shakespeare since 1935.) Cliff Faulkner's set provided a fascinating impression of a 1920s interior, full of period furniture and marvelously varied nooks and crannies. Similarly, Robert Wojewodski's lovely costumes added to the twenties flavor.

There were good performances from the entire, harmonious cast, but especially from the two leads, Don Sparks as the title character, and Sada Thompson as his mother-in-law. The only flaw I could find with Sparks was that he did not have a unique laugh; it was loud, but not unusual or distinctive. Otherwise, his preening and boasting were perfectly captured, and he displayed a good deal of ease and attractiveness. Sada Thompson, for many years the Duse of Off-Broadway in New York (with some pretty solid Broadway credits too), is now an Associate Artist of the Old Globe, performing regularly there. A splendid actress, with intelligence, charm, and enormous vitality on stage, she nailed down her role with a bang. Like so much in the production, her performance as the mother was full of meticulously chosen detail. For example, when her daughter began gently breaking the news about her husband's stroke, Thompson read the line "Somethin' the matter with your father" with a wonderful

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growing realization *during* the line, so that, despite its shortness, it changed from a question to a statement in midsentence. The best actors have an ability to make each line uniquely interesting, so that what might have seemed bland enough in the script comes to life. As with Paxton Whitehead, I hope to see Thompson many more times in my new Southern California surroundings.

Briefly noted: The Shakespeare Marathon at the New York Shakespeare Festival, which was to produce every play in the canon, has been largely a flop, but there have been occasional pleasant surprises. Last summer's *Othello*, directed by the Irishman Joe Dowling, and starring Raul Julia and Christopher Walken, was straightforward, clear, and affecting. Julia as Othello was vigorous and charming in the early scenes, especially the speech to the Senate, but fell a bit short (like most actors in this most difficult of Shakespearean roles) in the scenes of insane jealousy. Walken was a rather quirky Iago, looking something like a motorcycle hoodlum, but he had both the blunt charm and the "motiveless malignity" that are necessary for the role. These performances showed that, with a director who understands Shakespeare and is not out to draw attention to himself, American stars can play Shakespeare effectively.

The production was in Central Park; the performance I saw was delayed in the middle by an hour's rain, but when it resumed, the theatre was still full. Audiences would not have stuck around for most Festival productions these days. Ailing Joseph Papp has now stepped down as Festival head, to be replaced by JoAnne Akalaitis. She would do well to learn from directors like Dowling.

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BERT CARDULLO

Law of the Jungle

IN *YAABA* (1989), IDRISSA OUÉDRAOGO'S SECOND FEATURE FILM (his first, *The Choice* [1987], remains unseen by me), this screenwriter-director created an initiation rite, a rite of passage, of mythic significance for the people of his native Burkina Faso. Now in *Tilaï*, his third film, he has created a mortal tale of equally mythic significance for his West African countrymen.[1] Unlike the characters in ancient Greek tragedy, those in *Tilaï* are not larger than life, are neither kings nor generals, queens nor sirens; unlike Greek tragic figures, those in Ouédraogo's film do not strain against the confines of a theatrically conceived space and a word-defined world. What is larger than life in *Tilaï* is the space that surrounds the characters, and which they give the illusion of filling by remaining oblivious to its magnitude and majesty even as they journey through it; what is as important as the villagers' pithy utterances is the silence that often frames such utterances and which they feel no compulsion to fill with language. Like *Yaaba*, *Tilaï* has a single choral figure, not the twelve-to-fifteen-member chorus of Greek tragedy, and this character, rather than reciting long odes, repeats the same succinct line from the previous film, "That's life" or "That's the way of the world." The way of the world in *Yaaba* was constructive, procreative, or regenerative, since "That's life" was always a response on the part of the choral figure to the beautiful sounds of lovemaking. The way of the world in *Tilaï* is destructive, murderous, or degenerative, since "That's life" is always a response on the part of the choral figure to the dark recesses of the human heart.

"Tilaï" means "the law" or "the code of honor" in the local Moorish language, and, as usual in tragedies, the protagonist and the antagonist are both guilty of breaking it (think of Sophocles' *Antigone*, in which Creon violates the higher law that Antigone obeys and she violates the human law that he has decreed). Saga returns to his native

[1] *Yaaba* and *Tilaï* can be considered filmic extensions of the African oral tradition disseminated by *griots*, or storytellers, who often combine song, dance, and ritual with their narratives, and whose goal is not only to entertain audiences but also to reinforce their membership in the tribe or collective. Other examples of films of this type from Africa are Ngangura Mweze and Benoit Lamy's *La vie est belle* (Zaire, 1986), Souleymane Cissé's *Brightness* (Mali, 1987), Henry Duparc's *Bal poussière* (Ivory Coast, 1988), Kwaw Ansah's *Heritage Africa* (Ghana, 1988), and Flora Gomes's *Mortu Nega* (Guinea-Bissau, 1988).

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village after a mysterious absence of two years, only to find that his father, Nomenaba, has reneged on a promise to give him a young woman named Nogma as his bride and married her himself. The opening moments of the film set the tone, visually as well as aurally, for the difficulties Saga will encounter in attempting to reclaim Nogma: in a long take of a long shot, he rides a burro away from the camera and toward the village, in a frame where only his erect figure (in the center) and a lone tree in the distance (on the left) break the vast, desert plain; at the end of this shot Saga and the burro disappear over the horizon to the mournful rhythms of Abdullah Ibrahim's score for piano and flute. (Ibrahim also wrote the superb music for Claire Denis's *Chocolat* [1988], a film set, like *Tilaï*, in West Africa.) Upon reaching a ridge overlooking the village, Saga blows a horn, as if he were a messenger from Greek tragedy about to deliver important news. But all that he does here is ceremoniously signal his arrival to the villagers below, who have a message of their own to give to him: Nogma is wedded to his father. Saga's brother, Kougri, delivers that message and thus casts himself as the third actor in the drama that follows.

Feeling betrayed by both his father and Nogma's, Saga refuses to resume his life in the village, despite Nomenaba's command that he do so. Instead he retires to a thatch hut on the village's outskirts, where he conducts an adulterous affair—one that is also incestuous by tribal standards—with Nogma, who assures Saga that she is still in love with him and married Nomenaba only because she was forced to. Kuilga, Nogma's teenaged sister, is an accomplice to this affair, while Kougri observes it disapprovingly from a distance but does not betray his brother, since, as he reveals, he loves Saga as much as he does his father. Saga and Nogma plan to run away, but before they can, spies expose their affair to the entire village; Kuilga is openly castigated for lying on her older sister's behalf; a bound Nogma is held up to public ridicule in the village square; Kougri draws the task of slaying Saga for his transgressions; and Nogma's father, Tenga, hangs himself out of shame. Unable to kill his own brother, Kougri arranges for Saga's escape at the same time that he presents a bloody knife to Nomenaba as evidence that he has carried out the execution. (The blood is his own, from a self-inflicted wound; the body of his brother, Kougri leads everyone to believe, was reduced to ashes after he set fire to Saga's hut.) Saga finds sanctuary with his old Aunt Boré in a distant village—distant, that is, in a place devoid of automobiles—where he is eventually joined by Nogma, to whom Kougri has revealed that her lover is alive. Kougri, for his part, turns to his aged mother (and Nomenaba's first wife), Koudpoko, for solace. She is *Tilaï*'s choral figure, who tells her son "That's the way of the world" when he laments that "I violated tradition by not killing Saga. My conscience troubles me. It's all so complicated. We've all been stupid. Why did Father marry Nogma? Why did Saga rebel?"

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We never learn why Nomenaba married Nogma in his son's place (or why he left Koudpoko, for that matter), and the fact that Kougri asks why Saga rebelled against his father implies that he should not have rebelled, that he should have accepted his destiny, even as Nogma should have accepted hers—which is to suffer, according to Kougri. *Tilaï* is concerned less with an exploration of human psychology, then, with a championing of the individual, than with an examination of the social fabric, with a sanctioning of the group. To this end Ouédraogo avoids, as much as possible, cutting from character to character within a scene, preferring instead to hold his camera on two or more characters, and to link them by means of full and long shots to the primordial vista that has shaped their lives. To be sure, there are close shots (usually medium close-ups), but they are mostly limited to intimate scenes between Kougri and Koudpoko or Saga and Nogma, and their infrequency tends to lend an ominousness to their occurrence. Indeed, the last time we see Koudpoko alive, she is photographed lying quietly in medium close-up. Later we find out that she is dying, and it is her critical condition that compels Saga to return to his native village.

He runs back the entire distance barefoot (everyone is barefoot in this film, despite the occasional rockiness of the terrain) with a primitive rifle in hand, followed by the slower Aunt Boré and Nogma, who is by now pregnant with her first child; cross-cut with scenes from their journey is the scene of Koudpoko's death. Arriving alone on top of the ridge overlooking his village, Saga blows his horn, just as he did at the start of the film. The village elders scatter in fear at the sight of him—not the first of *Tilaï*'s judiciously employed comic moments—since they believe that the spirit of the dead Saga has returned to haunt them. Soon they realize, however, that Saga is in fact alive and that Kougri lied to his father when he said he had killed his brother. Then, in rapid succession, Kougri rebukes Saga for going back on his word never to return home; the latter goes to mourn over his mother's body, which is laid out nearby; Nomenaba banishes Kougri from the village for life for violating the tribal code by not executing Saga; Kougri abruptly shoots his brother dead—in the back—with Saga's own rifle as he grieves over Koudpoko's corpse; and Kougri leaves the village. On the way, he passes but does not acknowledge Nogma and Aunt Boré, who have finally come to the end of their long journey. We never see them reach the village, though. *Tilaï* concludes instead with a long take of a long shot in which Kougri walks away from the camera until he disappears over the horizon, plaintively accompanied on the soundtrack by Abdullah Ibrahim's music for piano and flute, and relentlessly drenched by the African sun—a sun whose dominating presence in this film, as photographed by Jean Monsigny and Pierre Laurent Chenieux, recalls the fateful role played by the Algerian sun in Camus's *L'Etranger*.

This circular ending, showing the lone individual in the middle of

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an immense landscape, is not a cute device, a neat way to end the picture. It identifies Kougri with the brother he has slain at the same time that it reconfirms the film's thesis: that violations of the social order for self-gratification or even out of selflessness inevitably lead to disastrous consequences, to the ostracism or demise of the individual. Nomenaba's going back on his promise to Saga by taking the much younger Nogma as his wife has cost him both his sons and Nogma as well, not to speak of Koudpoko, whose illness may have been brought on by the internecine struggle within her family. At the end of *Tilaï*, Nomenaba is left to face old age without his family, even as Kougri must face the future all alone. Kougri attempted to remain loyal to his brother at the same time that he remained loyal to the life of the tribe, he tried to save his brother's life at the same time that he rescued his father's dignity, and for his trouble, for his self-effacement (he has no wife nor do we see him seek one) he is rewarded with exposure by Saga and expulsion by Nomenaba. Kougri's killing of his brother is, paradoxically, both an act of loyalty to the tribe and of severance from it, just as Saga's return home is both an act of tribal loyalty, in the form of love for his mother, and of tribal defiance, in the form of his adultery-incest with Nogma. But Nogma is not there to bond with Saga as he dies, and we learn nothing of her subsequent fate—except that her father is dead, her mother never wants to see her again, and her baby will be a bastard.

As he did in *Yaaba*, Idrissa Ouédraogo uses only non-professional actors in *Tilaï*—several of them people who appeared in the previous film as well. The obvious advantage of Ouédraogo's using local villagers, among them relatives of his, is that they don't have to learn how to be at home in a new environment: this *is* their home, and they are therefore completely at ease in it. Another, not so obvious advantage is that, in a film that is less a wrenching drama than a sacrificial ritual, the actors must give themselves over to the ritual more than they must create character and emotion, must be subsumed by the tale more than they must dominate it, must act naturally more than they must super-naturally act. And this the untrained villagers are supremely qualified to do. They are aided in their work, of course, by the movie camera, which has a way of conferring grandeur on the simplest, most unassuming of human lives.

Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever* is about villagers of a different kind: those of New York City, which, with the possible exception of upper Manhattan, is America's most parochial city. (My mother, who spent the first forty years of her life in Brooklyn, rarely felt the need to venture outside Flatbush, let alone the borough itself.) Lee's "villagers" are all played by professionals, and it shows in the unevenness of their work, in the absence from all but a few scenes of an ensemble feeling. For every subtly inflected performance, like that of John Turturro or Annabella Sciorra, there is a forced or wooden one, like

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that of Wesley Snipes or Lee himself. For every powerfully affecting piece of acting, like Samuel L. Jackson's, there is a slackly maudlin one, like Anthony Quinn's. Even the cinematography of *Jungle Fever*—by Ernest Dickerson, who has shot all of Lee's features—is uneven, in that it combines realistic or on-location interiors—in a Bensonhurst candy store, an uptown architectural firm, a Harlem restaurant, a Greenwich Village apartment—with prettified or doctored exteriors, with outdoor scenes whose visual effects are so calculated that they seem to have been shot on sound stages. This has been a problem in all of Lee's color films, and I can only conclude that his time spent in film school (at New York University) has addicted him to cinematic trickery, to the legerdemain of the studio over the reality of the street. How else can one explain his outrageous use—twice!—of a traveling matte behind two characters in conversation, which creates the illusion that they are taking a walk when in fact they're standing still?

Jungle Fever is Spike Lee's fifth feature film (he has made one documentary, his thesis project at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts in 1982: *Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads*), which, as usual, he wrote as well as directed, and it comes amidst a plethora of films by blacks, about blacks—that is, about blacks more as they relate to one another than as they relate to whites. But Lee is the only one among the new wave of black directors who's even close to being an artist, and, despite its failings, his *Jungle Fever* is easily the best of the current crop of films about black America. It is far more sophisticated in its exploration of interracial relationships than his *School Daze* (1988) was in its treatment of the intraracial clash between light-skinned and dark-skinned blacks at an all-black college, and it deserves to be taken as seriously as *Do the Right Thing* (1989), Lee's serious but fatally flawed examination of racism and economic exploitation in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. Certainly *Jungle Fever* is something of a return to form for the thiry-four-year-old Lee after the disastrous *Mo' Better Blues* (1990), which thought it was telling the story of a black jazz musician from a black filmmaker's point of view, but was only retelling the formulaic, melodramatic story of countless jazz films, substituting a black trumpeter for the young white man with a horn, and throwing in a little anti-Semitism (in the person of two grossly caricatured Jewish club owners) for bad measure.

"Jungle fever" is the movie's description for interracial love—or lust—in the urban jungle of New York. Flipper Purify (Wesley Snipes)—God knows why Lee gave him this ridiculous name—is a successful young architect who lives on Striver's Row in the Sugar Hill section of Harlem with his light-skinned black wife, Drew (Lonette McKee), a buyer at Bloomingdale's, and his adoring little daughter, Ming. Angela Tucci (Annabella Sciorra) is a temp secretary with only a (Catholic) high-school education who lives in the Bensonhurst district of Brooklyn with her widowed father and two brothers, Jimmy

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and Charlie—the same Bensonhurst where in 1989 a gang of young Italians killed a black teenager, Yusuf Hawkins (to whom *Jungle Fever* is dedicated, and whose murder, says Lee, sparked the making of the film), because they thought he was dating a local white girl. Flipper and Angie meet when she takes the place of his former secretary at the architectural firm in Manhattan where he works, and which he eventually quits to go into business for himself (he says, but we never see this happen) because his two white bosses will not elevate him—their best, most productive architect—to partner. Flipper and Angie get along, despite the fact that he had demanded a black secretary,[2] and after a few late-night work sessions topped off with heartfelt conversation over Chinese take-out, they copulate on a drafting table. Here's Lee on the nature of Flipper and Angie's relationship: "She's attracted to him because she's been told that black men know how to fuck. He's attracted to her because all his life he's been bombarded with images of white women being the epitome of beauty and the standard that everything else must be measured against."

I beg your pardon, Spike, but your film reveals that Angie falls in love with Flipper (although Lee rushes the blossoming of that love), rejects her longtime boyfriend, Paulie Carbone (John Turturro), for him, and endures a beating from her father as well as the ostracism of her Bensonhurst neighbors—who learn of her affair from a girlfriend to whom she had entrusted her secret—in order to remain with her black lover. Flipper, by contrast, never commits himself to Angie, never has what can be called a complex relationship with her, despite his description of it as such. He moves into a Greenwich Village apartment with her only because his wife, to whom he has never before been unfaithful, throws him out of their place (after learning of his affair with a "low-class white bitch" from her best friend, Vera, who learned of it from her husband, Cyrus [Spike Lee], to whom Flipper had entrusted *his* secret); he insists to Drew that he loves her, not Angie; and he leaves his white lover the moment he has an excuse to: after his father, a defrocked Baptist preacher (Ossie Davis), delivers a racist tirade against miscegenation that culminates in his calling his son a whoremonger in front of Angie—a tirade that is followed by an incident on the street in which Flipper is accosted by two white cops for attempted rape, merely for playfully returning a punch that Angie threw at him to break the tension. When Flipper tells Angie that he doesn't love her and questions her motivation in getting together with him, she responds, "Speak for yourself, not for me."

[2] Flipper uses "African-American" instead of "black," like an alarming number of fellow travelers—white as well as black—in our country. I reject this term (and its previous incarnation, "Afro-American") until blacks begin calling whites "Caucasian-Americans," if not by their separate ethnic designations (Italian-American, Jewish-American, Irish-American, etc.).

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So Flipper pursued Angie merely out of sexual curiosity, as he finally admits, but by not having this character fall in love with his white girlfriend, Lee missed the opportunity to explore an interracial relationship, perhaps an interracial marriage, in depth—a marriage that Drew herself is the product of, and whose mixed race has drawn her the abuse of some blacks together with the adoration of others, like Flipper, as well as instilled in her the paradoxical belief that blacks should stop diluting their blood by procreating with whites. The closest we get to a genuine interracial relationship is in the tender moments between Paulie and a middle-class black woman who comes into his candy store every morning to buy the *New York Times*, but must settle for the *Post* or the *Daily News* instead, since Carbone's won't stock a newspaper that doesn't sell to its mostly working-class clientele. Paulie pursues this woman, Orin Good, after Angie breaks up with him, despite protests and beatings from his domineering father (Anthony Quinn) and loutish friends. Toward the end of the film, he has his first date with Orin, for which he arrives to the accompaniment of Sinatra's "Hello, Young Lovers" on the soundtrack. But although Lee has asserted that "their initial attraction is based on genuine feelings," he doesn't develop that attraction; we leave Orin and Paulie at her front door, never to see them again. (As in the Flipper-Angie relationship, the black in this one is educated and the white Italian is not, though he talks of applying to Brooklyn College; Lee doesn't seem to realize that, after race, differences in education—and thus in social class as well as earning power—keep people apart more than anything else.)

Instead of spending more time on the relationship between Orin and Paulie, why did Lee base *Jungle Fever* on the short-lived affair between Flipper and Angie, a couple that, according to the director, "came together because of sexual mythology"? Because, as he did in *Do the Right Thing*, he prefers to do the easier thing: cram his film with incident rather than exploration, with texture rather than subtext. It isn't as if he didn't have examples to draw from: there were 211,000 interracial marriages in the United States in 1990, of which 71 percent were between black men and white women, while 29 percent paired white men with black women. Lee's texture is sometimes very good: he gets exactly right, for example, the atmosphere of Carbone's Candy Store and the behavioral rhythms of the young men and old-timers who hang out there; and, with the help of Ernest Dickerson, he visually complicates the relationship between Flipper and Angie where his screenplay has tended to simplify or reduce it—during this couple's penultimate scene together in their sparsely furnished Greenwich Village apartment, for instance, she poignantly asks, "Are we together?" as they look off in opposite directions and are photographed in separate frames, with white light shining on Flipper in silhouette and low-key lighting on Angie in a black dress off one shoulder.

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But texture of this kind is not enough, and incident alone is too much, as in the case of Flipper's strained relationship with his crack-addicted brother, Gator (Samuel L. Jackson), whose sad story takes up a significant portion of the film. Lee seems to be responding here to the criticism that he unrealistically omitted the drug culture from the jazz world of *Mo' Better Blues* and the Bedford-Stuyvesant ghetto of *Do the Right Thing*. In *Jungle Fever*, however, the drug culture is superfluous: what does Gator's addiction have to do with Flipper and Angie's affair, with the response of the Good Reverend Doctor (the title by which his wife and sons always address him, despite his having been defrocked, apparently for sexual misconduct) and Mrs. Purify (Ruby Dee) to that affair? What does the Reverend's murder of Gator—for his addiction, for stealing from his own family, for tormenting his mother—have to do with Mr. Tucci's beating of Angie for "fucking a nigger"? And what does Flipper's anguished embrace, in the film's very last shot (during which the camera hyperbolically zooms in on him), of a drug-crazed black hooker have to do with his rejection of Angie? The answer to all of these questions is, of course, "nothing." Spike Lee has yet to learn that merely to juxtapose disparate narrative strands—something that film can do almost too easily—is not to connect them, to link them with a central theme. Two narrative strands that he could handily and fruitfully have merged, he fails to do: Flipper's starting his own business, beginning a career as a black architectural entrepreneur, with his committing himself to an interracial relationship in which Angie is his partner in work as well as in love.

By the end of *Jungle Fever*, Angie has returned home to the father who had banished her, while Flipper has returned home to the wife who had banished him and who banishes him again for his infidelity—but only after this black stud has satisfied her sexual needs as no white man ever could (this is the film talking, not your film critic!). Lee prefaces the bedroom scene between Flipper and Drew with a crane shot down to the street to pick up the delivery of the *New York Times* to the Purifys' doorstep, then up to and through their bedroom window. This sequence is a reprise of the one that opened the film and is testimony to little more than Lee's addiction to circularity and the use of his Louma crane—he used a similar shot to open and close both *Do the Right Thing* and *Mo' Better Blues*. Circularity here serves no purpose: it's thematically bankrupt, as it was not in *Tilaï*, and all the more so since it does not end the film, but is followed instead by Flipper's commiserative embrace of the black hooker after she has solicited him on the street.

Neither does much of Stevie Wonder's music serve a purpose: his eleven songs may make a new album for him (his first in four years), but most of them seem laid on the film; they combined with three Frank Sinatra recordings, a few tunes from Mahalia Jackson (heard during scenes in the home of Flipper's parents), a little rap music, and

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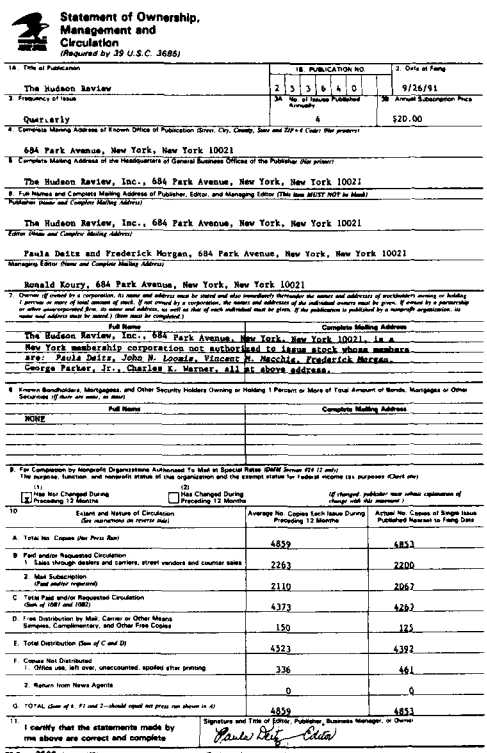
even some conventional movie scoring (by Terence Blanchard) to give this viewer a case of sensory overload. Again, contrast this heavy dependence on music with *Tilaï*'s discreet application of it: the title song is the only song, sung (by Abdullah Ibrahim, its author) over the opening and closing credits, and the instrumental music in-between never competes for attention with events on the screen. I suggest that Spike Lee take a look at *Tilaï* and other African films like it: he might discover something not only about artistic economy,[3] about the virtue (and resonance) of a simple tale straightforwardly told, but also about the culture of his Mother Africa—an Africa that he and his fellow black artists routinely trumpet as their ultimate place of origin, but about which they know so very little.

[3] Lee already knows about the other kind of economy: in addition to his film company, Forty-Acres-and-a-Mule Productions (through which he turns out music videos for Miles Davis, Stevie Wonder, and Prince in addition to his features), he owns Spike's Joint, a lucrative retail and mail-order business that merchandises books, videotapes, T-shirts, and other apparel for each of his movies. And then there is Lee's merchandising of himself, which he does through television commercials (for Nike, Levi-Strauss, and Diet Coke), talk shows, newspaper interviews, etc.

Coming in the Spring 1992 issue of The Hudson Review: "Stories from My Life with the Other Animals," by James McConkey, "The Last Year of the Soapbox," a story by T.M. McNally, and David Mason on the new Anne Sexton biography.



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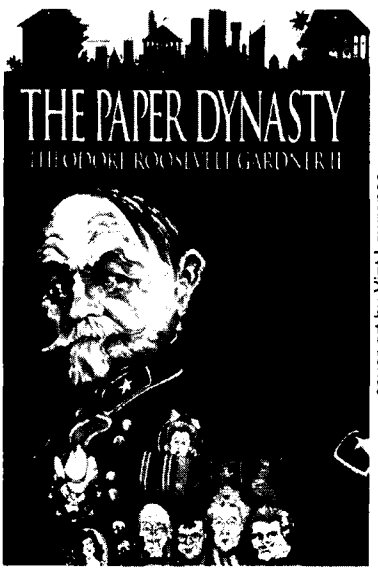

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HAROLD FROMM

Ford Madox Ford *Unmuddled?*

FORD HERMANN JOSEPH LEOPOLD MADOX HUEFFER FORD! One's heart simply sinks to contemplate this life—the multiple identities, the philanderings, the "wives," the vulnerabilities and self-exculpations, the feints and fetishes, the financial and emotional quagmires, the garrulities, the poetics and the politics, the frenetic career, the immense corpus of words and works, the conflicting critical evaluations, the whole "prison full of screaming hysterics," to quote *The Good Soldier*'s John Dowell, the most screaming hysteric of them all. And what a prison it was: its confining walls the boundaries of Ford's overwrought head, and its hysterics the offspring of his maddened and maddening psyche.

Twenty years ago, Arthur Mizener documented Ford's muddles and characterized them, in Ford's own words, as *The Saddest Story*.[1] His biography still provides the fullest account of a life driven by the ideals of art, the quest for a psychological utopia ("rest," Ford deludedly called it), and his perennially desperate need for money. Yet even with his prodigious output of novels, social and literary histories, poems, journalism, and biographies, and notwithstanding his very considerable gifts and utter dedication, he never really caught on in England, and his success in America was only moderately greater. After his death in 1939 he was almost forgotten until the fifties, when *The Good Soldier* and *Parade's End* underwent a revival and championing by American academic critics, an exaltation-by-coterie that has been a consistent feature of Ford's literary history, at times approaching critical blackmail.

Born in England as Ford Hermann Hueffer (i.e., Hüffer) in 1873, Ford already represented a muddled amalgam of cultures: his father's German and his mother's English roots left him feeling like a native of nowhere. Later on, a certain amount of American and French ethos was thrown in for good measure, all of which proved useful as psychological security blankets for Ford's incompatible needs. Given a musicologist father and an artist grandfather (Ford Madox Brown) of whom he wrote a biography when he was only twenty-three, Ford always felt most at home amidst creative intellectuals, starting in childhood with the Garnetts (Richard, Edward,

[1] Arthur Mizener, *The Saddest Story: A Biography of Ford Madox Ford* (New York and Cleveland, 1971).

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Olive, Constance) and the Rossettis (whose Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic he never entirely abandoned). In such a milieu, to be anything but an artist was merely to be "stuff for graveyards," a view that later on exacerbated his poor relationships with publishers and literary agents, whom he tended to regard as little more than tradespersons (even though J. B. Pinker served him for years as an almost paternal provider of cash when Ford was on the edge of starvation). It was through the Garnetts that Ford met Joseph Conrad in 1908, setting off a close and intense friendship/collaboration that endured for a decade, during which Ford developed his poetics of the novel as a Flaubertian *artform*, beyond the mere narrativity of the Victorians. By this time, Ford had long since become a quirkily half-hearted Roman Catholic (adding in the process the Germanic-Catholic "Joseph Leopold," as if he had not names and identities enough) and had eloped with Elsie Martindale. The marriage that evolved, from whose increasingly traumatic effects he could never shake free, was only one of the innumerable misfortunes that muddled his life while feeding his art, for he was skilled in thriving on adversity.

Underneath a seemingly imperturbable pink-faced, blond-haired exterior, Ford's nervous sensibility, and his diffidence mixed with boastfulness and mendacity, contributed to the first of his psychological collapses in 1904, ten years into his marriage. The stresses of life at the verge of poverty and his constant moving from house to shabby house with two young daughters (who eventually broke off all relations with him) could only add to the gradual breakup of his precarious relationship with Elsie, though Ford as a house companion would have taxed the most stoic reserves. (Ezra Pound famously remarked: Put Ford naked in an empty room and within an hour behold total chaos.) It was Elsie's refusal ever to grant him a divorce, however, that deeply entangled his subsequent relationships with women, of whom there were many. His liaison with Violet Hunt, a pretty wild character herself, ended up in a lawsuit initiated by Elsie to protest Hunt's appropriation of the title "Mrs. Hueffer." Ford had actually taken up residence in Germany with the dreamworld aim of being legitimately remarried there, no one quite understanding how, but this "marriage" turned out to be so unofficial, documentless, and phantasmal that it was easy for Elsie to demonstrate they were in fact not married at all. The resulting scandal alienated many of his friends and did not do his precarious literary reputation any good. Henry James wrote Violet Hunt a crass letter breaking off relations—and Leon Edel reports that James once even hid behind a tree to avoid meeting them, since at best they were always low in his hierarchy of desirables. But along with everything else in Ford's life, episodes like these provided raw material for his sometimes vindictive fictions, Sylvia in *Parade's End*, Leonora and Florence in *The Good Soldier* representing just a few of the more well-known embodiments.

In the Introduction to his biography, Arthur Mizener cites Pound's

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characterization of Ford as an "halluciné"; "He was the helpless victim of his own imagination. . . . He could not extricate himself from what he imagined and what actually happened. . . . He told stories about himself constantly and as the stories were retold he embroidered them. . . . He fabricated and elaborated his life as assiduously as he fabricated and elaborated his books." He could tell someone that his latest book had sold 12,000 copies when it had sold only 1200, because he wanted to convey that *his* 1200 copies equalled the success of a 12,000-copy potboiler. In one of the letters included in Sondra Stang's *The Ford Madox Ford Reader*, Ford writes the publisher Stanley Unwin from America, shortly before his death, to tell him that "I have really an enormous reputation here. I am generally regarded as the Dean of American Letters," and that in the course of a dinner speech at the PEN club, Sinclair Lewis "styled me not only the Dean of American Letters but the most eminent man of letters not only in English but in the world." Although it would seem impossible to add more, Ford could do it: ". . . and the sentiment was received with unanimous applause."[2]

Ford's misrepresentations of self were part and parcel of his misrepresentations of factual matters altogether. He conceded his inaccuracies but thought they were hardly worth correcting, for what really mattered, he claimed, was the accuracy of *impressions*; thus, the aesthetic of impressionism that underlies most of his writing. "I have for facts a most profound contempt. I try to give you what I see to be the spirit of an age, of a town, of a movement. This cannot be done with facts."[3] Mizener notes that "in Ford's novels, the individual who sees or comprehends, moreover, is always Ford, never an objective, impersonal consciousness. Ford's novels are never reliable representations of reality. Their value depends on the amount of authenticity he can give the imaginary life he creates in them." Admittedly, this is what we generally mean by art, but in Ford's case it has been carried to an extreme that contributes to our sense of his eccentricity, non-universality, and excessive particularity as a writer. Yet he was no more accurate in his memoirs or biographies, so that it has become a commonplace of Ford criticism to think of everything he wrote or said as a kind of fiction whose principal subject was himself—which makes it surprising that critics continue to take his descriptions of his own works so literally. His book about Henry James suffers from vapidity and vacuousness, his biography of Conrad—while powerful as an account of Ford's own aesthetic—has surprisingly little to say about Conrad, his book about Provence is not *really* about Provence but about Ford's own never-never land: in all these cases he is actually concerned with a world elsewhere, a world presented through anec-

[2] *The Ford Madox Ford Reader*, ed. by Sondra Stang (New York, 1986), p. 509.
[3] From his memoir, *Ancient Lights*, in Stang, p. 92.

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dotes whose chief reality exists most fully in his fantasies of a psychological utopia.

Ford saw himself as a Tory Radical, a member, albeit threadbare, of England's ruling class, an heroic milieu in which, ideally at any rate, the landed aristocracy should play a paternalistic, even socialistic, role in caring for ordinary people suffering under the rapacity of capitalism. "The question for Ford," Mizener remarks, " was how a gentleman of Tory predilections, for whom the clear eighteenth-century mind was a model, who believed the feudal system of social relations the best mankind had ever devised, and who had an heroic sense of personal honor, would conduct himself in such a world." This magnanimous conception of society, another never-never land, became even more anachronistic after the Great War, though Ford had already depicted its ruins in *The Good Soldier.*

In spite of Ford's age in 1915, when *The Good Soldier* appeared, he sought a commission in the army and served at the front during the Great War, although he himself was not part of the fighting (but, like everything else he did, he gradually mythified it into a world-historical act). The psychological effects of the war on his life and writing were deep, approaching madness, and they dominated much of his subsequent writing, particularly the tetralogy, *Parade's End.* Yet this novel, it can be argued, though it goes downhill and has its longueurs and repetitions, is a more potent, more sane, more world-connected vehicle of Ford's inveterate representations of self than the more celebrated *The Good Soldier.* Roger Sale attributes the special appeal of its first volume, *Some Do Not . . .* , to the fact that Ford was in the initial, upbeat phase of his cohabitation with Stella Bowen, who had succeeded Violet Hunt as his unofficial wife. The subsequent falling off of the novel he sees, very plausibly, as a reflection of their deteriorating relationship.[4] Admittedly, all artists produce out of the fullness of their selves—what else *is* there? But Ford's self was unusually full of itself, making the relationship between his life and his art especially close, always an aesthetic danger if one hopes to reach an outside world.

Through the character of Christopher Tietjens, *Parade's End* in the twenties traced the collapse of the Tory Radical country gentleman as a viable idea and offered in its place Ford's final panacea, the somewhat democratized rural haven and place of "rest" that he adumbrates more fully in *Provence* and *The Great Trade Route* close to the end of his life. In these works, which have their brilliances (such as Ford's metaphorical denunciation of the invention of the wheel as the source of all our capitalist/industrialist woe), he develops his notion, to quote Graham Greene, of "the Small Producer, as against the big individual capitalist and the small communist cog. He would

[4] Roger Sale, "Ford's Coming of Age: *The Good Soldier* and *Parade's End*," in *The Presence of Ford Madox Ford*, ed. by Sondra Stang (Philadelphia, 1981).

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have every man a part-time agriculturalist, because such a man is free in a sense unrecognized by either Fascist or Communist, free from the State ideal."[5] Yet even though Ford sounds by the 1930s like an ecologically prescient forerunner of Wendell Berry, right down to an awareness of environmental destruction by chemicals, his Small Producer was less a public-oriented reformer than a dispirited Fordian Candide seeking "rest" from a chaotic postwar world in the cultivation of his garden, just as Christopher Tietjens gives up his aristocratic patrimony and becomes a rustic dealer in antique furniture.

During the war, Ford had refused to capitulate about his German name, which had been a liability for some time, but not long afterwards he became Ford Madox Ford, principally, it seems, to avoid another contretemps with Elsie. Thus Stella Bowen is addressed as Stella Ford in the dedicatory introduction to the 1927 reissue of *The Good Soldier*. But this third major relationship was nonetheless compromised by Ford's brief affair with Jean Rhys (whom he and Stella took in virtually off the streets) and Stella began to feel she had had enough. Ford's liaison with Janice Biala endured until his death, though there were always other women.

With an art as deeply intertwined with life as Ford's, biography serves an especially important mediating role. Mizener is ideal in assessing Ford's strengths, shortcomings, generosity, insights, skill, and uncertain literary status. Critical though it may be of his failures, it does full justice to his successes, like Ford's celebrated achievement in establishing the *English Review* in 1908. As an editor he was universally acknowledged as brilliant and the magazine's attraction of a large roster of Edwardians and early modernists—Wells, Galsworthy, James, Lawrence, Wyndham Lewis, Pound—was the direct result of Ford's astuteness, skill, and wide acquaintance, even as his financial ineptness pulled it all down within a year and a half, forcing its sale and leaving him with debts he could ill afford. A similar sequence of events took place in 1924-25 when he started the *transatlantic review*, this time publishing Hemingway, Joyce, and other Paris expatriates of the twenties. Once again excellence did not preclude financial ruin.

Mizener's documentation is massive but unobtrusive, his writing exemplary, his synthesis of evidence always penetrating, and he maintains awesome control of his rich materials. Since nothing of importance has taken place to reduce the stature of this classic work, the first question that arises in connection with Alan Judd's biography[6] is why he has produced it. Because he provides no documentation except for a Bibliographical Note at the end, my sense is that he offers little new information apart from a postscript to the American

[5] Graham Greene, "The Landowner in Revolt," in *Critical Essays on Ford Madox Ford*, ed. by Richard A. Cassell (Boston, 1987), p. 161.

[6] FORD MADOX FORD, by *Alan Judd*. Harvard University Press. $27.50.

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edition (which he recently elaborated upon in the *TLS* of July 12, 1991). Here, Judd details his eleventh-hour discovery of unpublished letters and poems involving a hithertofore unknown American woman friend to whom Ford had actually been "engaged." Otherwise, in his Acknowledgements at the beginning of the book, Judd announces he will mostly follow Mizener's "chronology." In reality, Mizener is the hovering presence that to a large extent has influenced—one might go so far as to say "generated"—the form and substance of this revisionary "life."

Instead of replicating an already definitive "documentary" style, what Judd required was an entirely different genre to suit his different aim. He has therefore drastically pruned the known materials in order to provide uncluttered narrative units based on central thematic episodes, on which he expatiates much more freely and speculatively than Mizener, moving forward and backward from these centers as his interest dictates. His motivation is clear: to rehabilitate Ford both artistically and personally from the damaging quantities of negative commentary that have accrued over the past seventy-five years, particularly to rescue Ford from Mizener's often acidulous plainspeaking. The method for achieving this is a closer, bolder, and more sympathetic approach to the interiority of his subject ("he thought," "he felt," "he imagined," "he regretted"), perhaps in the belief that "tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner."

The new story gets off to a disappointing start: "There are also the rich in spirit. It overflows and is seen in everything they do." The syntactical awkwardness is not unforgivable, even though there are others like it, because Judd mostly tells his ruminative story well. The claim for Ford's richness of spirit, however, seems melodramatic and excessive, even if we grant his generosity to other people and his aesthetic virtuosity, and it sets the exculpating tone that permeates the biography as a whole, weakening its credibility through unrestrained special pleading. "Ford's failings are well known and have been re-heated and served up many times. . . . Yet he did nothing sensationally—or even unusually—bad. He had a checkered married life, told some lies, a greater number of tall stories and sometimes just embroidered the truth, often after saying that that was what he was doing." Furthermore, we are told, we need Ford's rambling, because "the ramble was the point . . . his soft tones, his stories, his contradictions, his unqualified assertions and his many qualifications are an architectonic creation." Okay, but it is not going to be easy to overcome an already sizable and unusually high-quality critical tradition unless a brilliantly strong case can be made. And this is something Judd is not impressively able to do, however richly appreciative he turns out to be of Ford's best qualities. Regarding Ford's game-playing: "After all, the game-playing didn't actually matter." On Ford's multiple identities: "No doubt it would be possible to debate at length as to whether he ever 'found himself' in the normal sense of

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the term, whether he ever achieved the integrated personality that we are all supposed to evolve. But would it matter?" If Ford mismanaged his financial affairs—not to worry!—so does practically everyone else. If Ford tended to lie, to say he had been to Eton when he had in fact been to Praetorious in Folkestone, well, "if someone had nudged him after he'd mentioned Eton and said, 'Surely, Praetorious, Folkestone?' he would probably have nodded and said, 'Of course, yes, but you know what I mean. That sort of thing.' " If Stella Bowen complained that Ford "had a genius for creating confusion and a nervous horror of having to deal with the results," Judd can reply that "It was, in any case, a characteristic that had its beneficial aspect." Even as regards Ford's own art, Judd is ready to excuse much. "Nor does it matter that his practice did not always conform to his ideals. He often exaggerated and used superlatives, particularly in his journalism, and even in some of his more careful writing" he could be careless and lazy. "It is not really his contradictions, such as they were, that are the problem; rather, it is the effect they have on others." (But it takes two to tango.) And when a Ford admirer, Thomas Moser, asks, "Could an agoraphobic, neurasthenic, impressionistic solipsist—with, surely, a schizoid personality—write a good novel? It seems unlikely, except that Ford did it," Judd dismisses this as a "non-question." But Judd, unhappy as he is about all these badmouthings, is unable to counteract them by anything more weighty than the empty refrain that such pejoratives just don't matter.

Judd is strongest when he provides fuller and more speculative accounts than Mizener of Ford's involvement with Jean Rhys, Ford's politics and sexuality, Ford's lesser-known writings (there is a sensitive examination of the masterful style of his historical trilogy, *The Fifth Queen*), and as a novelist himself he is clearly aiming to fashion a prose vehicle that partakes of at least some of the consciousness-preempting qualities of fiction. This means that Judd takes many narrative liberties to suggest what might have been going on in Ford's mind, some of which work well and others not so well. Perhaps the single most unusual feature is his use of extended quotations, particularly the inclusion of all or part of a dozen or so of Ford's poems, one of them thirteen pages long. This attempt to rehabilitate Ford as a poet by providing the actual texts turns out to be rewarding, for the poems are oddly attractive in their informality (Ford wrote them quickly and didn't revise) and sometimes strong, especially about the war.

But if Judd appears to be successful in presenting a more positive Ford, it is an appearance only, achieved by the questionable expedient of leaving out lots of the truly awful stuff, like Ford's crazy letters to publishers and to Pinker, like the bizarre letter to his fourteen-year-old daughter reproduced by Mizener, and myriad other unsavory details essential to his life and art. Insisting that all these things don't matter will not enhance Ford's reputation, since any reading of his actual works is bound to reveal the falsity of this claim.

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And surely those works put serious obstacles in the way of Ford's rehabilitation as a really first-rate writer of this century. Speaking personally, I found Ford's learning, breadth, keen intellect, peculiar sensibility, and comic insights more and more appealing as I read him more, but his garrulity, maunderings, absurdities, self-blindness, wound-licking, and other personalized specificities are obstructions to the achievement of truly free-standing, "autonomous" literary artifacts. Edward Garnett was right when he said that "acute things and flashes of true discernment are sandwiched with Münchausen-like anecdotes and childish conceit."[7] In sum, Ford is an uneven writer for whom too many excuses have to be made, and in this regard Judd's biography unwittingly gives away the show.

The problems present in most—if not all—of Ford's work can be seen even in *The Good Soldier*. This novel is widely considered Ford's "masterpiece" (with *Parade's End* a close runner-up), but, to continue speaking personally, I find myself in a minority position in experiencing it as a brilliant failure, a paradigm of Fordian muddles. In its singular first-person narrative, John Dowell relates the preposterous story of his own decade-long imperception of his wife's infidelities with, among other, Edward Ashburnham, whom Dowell idolizes as a model of English Tory Radicalism, not to mention Dowell's swallowing the story of her "heart condition" and her need to lock her bedroom door against intruders, myths she invents to keep him sexually at a distance while she enjoys her lovers right under his nose. Dowell has been regarded by critics as everything from comically dotty and "unreliable" to pathologically incapable of action or passion, to the only character capable of loving, to a serious stand-in for Ford himself. The novel as a whole, as inscrutable as *Wuthering Heights*, *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, unlike them has been seen as everything from utterly comic to pathetically tragic. When the most basic aspects of literary response like these cannot be agreed upon, one must wonder what it means to be a "masterpiece," since it is impossible to establish even the novel's minimal substantive nature. What, one wants to know, is *the thing* that is the masterpiece? This comedy? This tragedy? This sanity? This madness? Must not one *establish* the aesthetic object before one can pronounce judgment upon it?

Though for me *The Good Soldier* comes off as wildly comic, calling to mind *Tristram Shandy*, and though its narrator seems hopelessly demented, Arthur Mizener is surely right when he says that Dowell is to be taken seriously and that his opinions are pretty much those of Ford himself, for whom he is a stand-in. A widely recognized component of this probably unintentional comic effect is Dowell's

[7] Edward Garnett, "Instructive and Amusing," *Weekly Westminster*, Feb. 14, 1925; reprinted in *Ford Madox Ford: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Frank MacShane (London and Boston, 1972), p. 141.

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scatterbrained astuteness, but what is rarely attested to is the thoroughly cartoon-like quality of all the characters, except perhaps for Dowell himself (and even he easily qualifies as a Feiffer neurotic) and possibly Leonora, Ashburnham's wife. As cartoons, they make it impossible for me to feel any emotion short of astonishment at their inadequacy. To consider them as "people" is to attempt to assess the inner lives of Snoopy, Lucy, and Charlie Brown.

I think the reason *The Good Soldier* has been taken to be one of Ford's few really successful productions (even though there is no agreement as to its nature, a curious state of affairs) is that despite all of its vaunted aesthetic consciousness and controlled craft (and craftiness), it may be unique as an almost perfect recording of his primary processes, with all their affect, narcissism, hyperbole, fantasy, and self-flattering misperceptions. (Unlike the techniques of *Parade's End*, which register its characters with elaborate density, the representation of primary processes in *The Good Soldier* seemed to require little more than the cartoon shorthand of dreams, except for the consciousness of the narrator himself.) John Dowell, alternately raving and insightful but basically frightened and ineffectual, and Edward Ashburnham, philandering, handsome, virile, aristocratic (just as dotty as Dowell, but muted by English repression, a phenomenon that always intrigued Ford), together present an uninhibited expression of Ford's actual and fantasy selves. "I can't conceal from myself the fact that I loved Edward Ashburnham," Dowell explains, "and that I love him because he was just myself." In what boils down to a shadowy specimen of the *Doppelgänger* novel (like those of Conrad, Dostoevsky, Hesse), Ford has succeeded in engineering a polygraphic presentation of self—through the character of an unbuttoned narrator who gradually lets it all hang out—while simultaneously making self-protective use of the formal distancings of art. The result appears "successful," even a "masterpiece," because the outpouring of the narrator is so stunningly authentic (like *Notes from Underground*), practically orgasmic in its release of inexpressible, unintelligible emotion. (Dowell keeps remarking upon the impossibility of arranging all his material into any temporal order or coherence, an admission that his story is beyond the capabilities of mere narrative, which is already too rationalized to convey such primal, tormented reality.) At the same time, the performance is utterly nonplussing in its lack of resonance outside its own peculiar psychological hothouse, i.e., that prison of screaming hysterics, Ford's "rest"-seeking mind, a sort of Nirvana principle strapped to a runaway motorcycle. As a godsend for classroom analysis of the art of fiction, *The Good Soldier* fuses together the extremest aesthetic and solipsist elements of Sterne, Meredith, Conrad, and James. But its connections with an extra-Fordian world are just about nil.

Alan Judd expresses much admiration for *The Good Soldier*, though he has little to say that might convince us of the rightness of his

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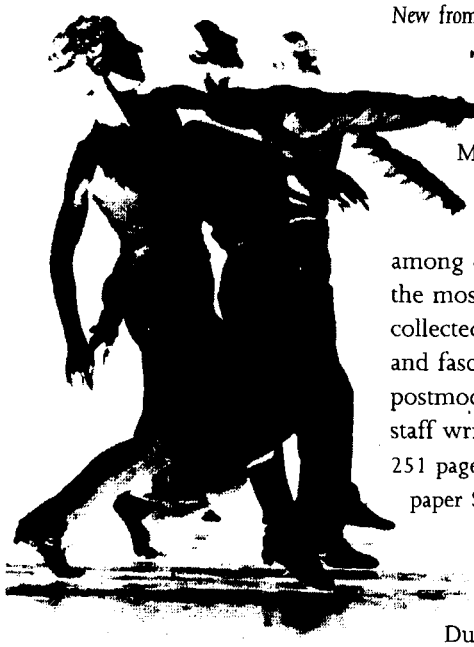
estimation. Perhaps he feels such justification is yet one more thing that doesn't really matter. But the critical writing that has accumulated around Ford testifies to the insurmountable complexities involved in any rehabilitory enterprise. Books from the eighties—on "the life in the fiction" and "the voice of uncertainty"[8]—are indicative of the epistemological and aesthetic problems to be faced in any revisionary attempt at canonization. The inescapable ambiguities of life vs. art, self vs. non-self, personal vs. public, essential vs. accidental are so far from not mattering that they would seem to constitute the essence of any Fordian confrontation. As for the sanguine hope of a Ford Madox Ford *unmuddled*, it's not bloody likely.

[8] Specifically: Thomas C. Moser, *The Life in the Fiction of Ford Madox Ford* (Princeton, N.J., 1980), and Ann Barr Snitow, *Ford Madox Ford and the Voice of Uncertainty* (Baton Rouge and London, 1984).



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CLARA CLAIBORNE PARK

Left-Handed Compliments: The Practicality of Frank Kermode

CALLED A SUPERB REVIEWER BY NO LESS an authority than Geoffrey Hartman,[1] Frank Kermode gladly speaks up for reviewing as "a skilled and many-faceted job." Though he is, of course, like Professor Hartman, a scholar and critic, a superb practitioner of "the sort of thing," in his own modest words, "that professors like, and are expected, to do as part of their jobs," he doesn't, for all that, accept the common academic opinion that reviewing is merely "the work of the left hand." He introduces this collection of thirty-seven reviews[2] (selected from some hundred) by making clear his satisfaction that "the English-speaking literary world . . . acknowledges nothing comparable to the sharp distinction Germans make between *Tageskritik* and *Literaturwissenschaft*, reviewing and literary study." That professors should review books is good both for them and for the reading public. Readers "can be fairly certain the reviewer has at least some idea of what he is talking about"; professors are reminded "that they have a duty, easily neglected, to make themselves intelligible to non-professors." "Talking among themselves," he continues, "they may feel some need to be impressively arcane, but when addressing intelligent non-professors they need to remember one of the less offensive precepts of Lord Chesterfield: 'Speak the language of the company you are in; and speak it purely, and unlarded with any other.' "

Since Mr. Kermode both reads and writes closely, he would wish us to notice the difference between "feel[ing] some need" and actually needing, and that the second degree of need has been previously stated as a duty. Neither as professor nor reviewer does Kermode feel any need to be impressively arcane, and though he takes on such difficult material as deconstruction and semiotics, they do not tempt him to neglect his duty. The intelligent non-professor (as well as the large body of intelligent professors who are not specialists in the fields covered by the book under review) can read this book with comprehension, profit, and pleasure.

[1] Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Tea and Totality: The Demand of Theory on Critical Style," in *After Strange Texts: The Role of Theory in the Study of Literature*, ed. by Gregory S. Jay and Donald L. Miller (Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 1985).

[2] THE USES OF ERROR, by *Frank Kermode*. Harvard University Press. $24.95.

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Comprehension enables us to learn; pleasure makes us want to. There's pleasure, lots of it, in the wit, exactitude, and subtle clarity of Mr. Kermode's prose. (He admits to thinking that some of his best writing "has been buried in reviews.") There is profit in their responsiveness and range. Reviewers, as he says, "need . . . to know quite a bit about quite a number of things"; he didn't need to add that they need to be *interested* in quite a number of things, the more the better. If they weren't, after all, even the most assiduous of readers would know far less about what's up in books and in the world, past and present.

Kermode, for example, knows quite a bit about St. Augustine. It's characteristic that his appreciative review of Peter Brown's biography asks at once the intelligent non-professor's question: "Why should one care about this ancient, disagreeable man?" And with Professor Brown's help he proceeds, in four elegantly fact-packed pages, to make sure that we know why. He knows quite a bit about Joachim of Fiore, who is, after eight hundred years, less irrelevant to the history of our own time than we might think; he knows quite a bit about the history, theory, and practice of biblical interpretation; about Freud and Winnicott; about Beethoven; about the cities of Renaissance Italy and Victorian England. He knows enough about past attitudes to death and dying to take judicious issue with Philippe Ariès. He knows enough about history, including the history he has lived through, to make the kind of sense of literature and art that cannot be made without it. And since Kermode can do what he says the reviewer should, "write prose that intelligent people can understand and enjoy," he communicates not only a generous measure of his knowledge, in dialogue with the book under review, but his own committed caring, his conviction that such knowledge matters.

But Kermode knows more than a bit about English literature, and most of these reviews are about English writers. He has included relatively little on the subjects of his more donnish (his adjective) work, the canonical writers of the English Renaissance. Rather, he ranges among the writers who would have provided the familiar background sounds for a reader born like himself in England in 1919: Tennyson, Leslie Stephen, Gissing; Wilde, Wells, Shaw, Conrad; Forster, Virginia Woolf, Eliot, Betjeman, Orwell, Larkin, with others less known to American readers. He can draw us in with an opening sentence: "Wells seems to grow more and more interesting, not only because of additional information on his marriage, girls and quarrels, but because a certain conformity to deep and interesting patterns in English life is being made more evident." He has an eye for the irresistible anecdote: Tennyson remarking "that in his opinion there had not been since Shakespeare 'a master of the English language such as I,' " then adding, "To be sure, I've got nothing to say." He is at once skeptical of big claims and hospitable to new ideas; reliably moderate, balanced, fair. On Marshall McLuhan, for example, seen

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from the vantage point of 1988: "There might after all be something to be said for McLuhan's way of doing and saying things: . . . his concealments and self-deceptions and errors were almost necessary to getting the truth, or its possibility, across." He is wary of those like Ariès and so many more, whose work is founded on the conviction that "anything that seems obvious, or is widely believed, must be challenged." He can judge, and thinks it both possible and important to do so. Though Forster even among Edwardians seemed "a man of the past," he wrote in *A Passage to India* a book which made him "everybody's contemporary," more modern "than some obvious 'modernists,' " "one book of his at least . . . not dulled by trafficking with a dead social grammar," but "essential," "to be handed on," because "no foreseeable revolution in our culture can invalidate its complicated passion." To distinguish bad, good, and great (a word he is not ready to discard) is still part of the critic's job.

As a reviewer, Kermode would rather be appreciative; he doesn't, he says, like "what is called knocking copy," and reprints only one such, doubtfully and for a particular reason (of which more later). Respectful of the book he's reviewing and our readerly right to know what's in it, he never reduces it to a mere excuse for his own essay. To *review* the book is part of the reviewer's duty.

Like Edmund Wilson, another fine reviewer, he possesses the necessary skill, difficult and undervalued, of compact and readable summary. It is in Kermode, I think (though not in Wilson), a skill not unconnected with the modest stance, implicit in every well-placed "perhaps" and "might," of someone who prefers to claim no more than "quite a bit" of knowledge, no more than "at least some idea what he is talking about." It's of course very possible that this is only a stance; the one instance of "knocking copy" included here shows how confident and dangerous Kermode can be in self-defense. Still, these lucid summaries show an admirable capacity for self-effacement, for receptivity—"negative capability" if you like. One must often look sharp to detect the nearly invisible irony which detaches Kermode's own evaluation from the accurate, fair presentation of a set of ideas you begin to guess, somewhere into the paragraph, just can't be his own. But mostly the summaries are unweighted; the point is to let the reader know what's up. That's worth doing in itself; only when it's done, and well done, can the reader savor the fruits of Kermode's own scholarship, wit and measure.

In short, for the beleaguered common reader, he is indeed the superb reviewer Hartman called him. But wait. Better look at the full quotation (from the 1985 essay "Tea and Totality"):

> Today George Steiner and Frank Kermode are the only successful translators of technical or speculative ideas into an idiom familiar to the university don brought up "before the flood," yet they are

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> superb reviewers rather than originative thinkers; their vocation is an Arnoldian diffusion of ideas and not a radical revision or extension of knowledge.

This is strong stuff, for Hartman is not talking here about Kermode's book reviews, his *Tageskritik*, but his *Literaturwissenschaft*, his "donnish" work. Worse yet, "the critic who uses the conversational style" (Hartman isn't fingering Kermode here, but he might as well be) "may actually be doing a disservice to language." The process of translating, "with the best intentions," "hazardous ideas into ordinary speech," is a "homogenizing" process, a process of "entropy." "We have accepted difficulty in art"; we must do the same for literary criticism.

Strong stuff indeed. However warmly, even generously presented, it breathes a continental condescension toward what Hartman calls, rather nicely, "the friendship style," and all it implies of a genuine concern for literature's relation to the readers who must finally maintain it. "Arnoldian diffusion of ideas" is dismissed as an inadequate purpose. "Critics in the Anglo-American tradition are arbiters of taste, not developers of ideas." The English are, "as Goethe remarked of Byron," "devoid of inwardness," "a practical people." Anglo-American critical discourse is all too readily "reduced" to the "witty gentility" of "the *honnête homme*": "a person, that is, whose rank or profession could not be discerned when he talked in polite society." So much for Lord Chesterfield.

And so much for Kermode. Clarity, unpretentiousness, moderation, even friendliness are no longer virtues, as Hartman's left hand assimilates them to a thirty-year tradition (1920–1950) in which, though it included the "marvelous, idiosyncratic talents" of Eliot, Richards, Empson, Leavis, and Trilling, "nothing happened." Anglo-American criticism, alas, is all too likely to be "genteel criticism."

I imagine that among pejoratives Kermode would choose "practical" over "genteel." Americans tend to believe that a British accent automatically confers gentility. It is a mark of gentility not to be too explicit about money or where it comes from—witness Henry James. One doesn't read far in Kermode's book without noticing his economic explicitness, his insistent awareness of the British class system, experienced not from its upper reaches, but from the lower middle's lower edges. It may be as small a matter as his care to make sure we understand what past income means in current figures. If stingy Tennyson was making (from poetry!) £10,000 a year, think £150,000. Gissing usually earned no more than £3 a week, but in 1895 he made over £500, "not a fortune, but about £20,000 in our money." Forty years later when £3 was worth much less, that happened to be the weekly wage of Kermode's father, "for the first twenty years of my life." Such practical information may not, in its call to the experiential imagination, be entirely devoid of inwardness. Kermode, at any rate,

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knows from within the explanatory power of class, its relevance to human experience, and thus to literary comprehension.

Here, for example, is Kermode on class and the reading public. He is reviewing Helen Gardner's *New Oxford Book of English Verse*, remade in 1972 not for its former public, but for the sophisticated taste "inculcated in the universities." Dame Helen's anthology is no longer the book that he received, leatherbound, for a school prize in 1934, and the change is not to be comprehended without thinking of class. Five years later, when Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's revision of his original *Oxford Book* of 1900 appeared, not only his taste but his project was outdated. 1939 was not 1900. "The entire constitution of the poetry-reading public was changing fast, and the lower-middle-class public, which once assumed that virtue lay in the imitation of a better-educated and more polite class above it . . . no longer found a smattering of poetry . . . socially necessary." Like Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*, Q's anthology had testified to "a kind of unified literary culture which all the efforts of the universities have not replaced." It was, "no doubt, a culture of a humble, even tiresome kind," its lower reaches not unfairly suggested by the Nausicaa episode of *Ulysses* and the bits of poetry ("golden opinions," "more sinned against than sinning") that had "peeled off the parent poems" to sink even into minds like Gertie MacDowell's. Yet—here follows Kermode's characteristically balanced judgment—its disappearance is a loss. In 1861 Palgrave could hope his anthology would prove " 'a storehouse of delight to Labour and Poverty.' That function of poetry is now obsolete; the work is done instead by television advertising." Not likely, now, that the lower-middle-class grandfather of the poet Roy Fuller would, as we learn in another review, greet a friend with "How now, Tubal! What news from Genoa?" And if the loss seems small, "it's worth remembering that the culture of the newly literate might be represented not only by Gertie . . . but by D. H. Lawrence," in a society in which poetry was still "something you might read without embarrassment, and without taking a course in it."

Naturally Professor Hartman is not thinking of this kind of thing when he chooses the adjective "genteel." It is not the gritty actualities of position and experience that concern him, but language, specifically, here, the language of literary critics. Kermode thinks about language too. But as one of Goethe's Englishmen he does tend to go at it more practically. It is through the language of a Gertie and a grandfather that he considers and regrets the diminished place of poetry "in [where else?] our lives."

Practicality tends to reinforce moderation, and with it a good-natured reserve toward the more abstract realms of theory. Practicality notices that a lot of excitingly radical revisions and extensions of knowledge don't really work, or work only when so qualified as to render them far less exciting. Kermode would not, I think, apologize for English cultural habit, or for the extra dose of practicality

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conferred by inside experience of the life of those who support a family on £3 a week. Practical minds make use of what they can, garnering what seems applicable to the life of human beings. They may or may not glean among the fields of theory. Many, certainly, avoid them, put off by difficulty, trapped, like poor Q, in a nostalgia for past simplicities, real or imagined. Kermode is not among these. Though brought up before the flood he has, as Geoffrey Hartman recognizes, willingly exposed himself to the hazards of modern critical theory, to the point where he can translate its "technical or speculative ideas" into language genteel enough, or friendly enough, to be understood by intelligent non-professors and antediluvian dons. In his Clarendon and Northcliffe Lectures (published in 1988 as *History and Value*) he does more of this than in the present book. Still, a cheerfully accessible review of *The Name of the Rose* includes the Bakhtinian concept of carnival, handily defined as an "inversion of normal cultural style," as well as a three-sentence distillation of propositions from Eco's *Theory of Semiotics* on signs, codes, and their arbitrary relationship to the world. Other reviews précis the ideas of critical theory as briskly and accurately as the ideas, perhaps equally hazardous, of Joachim or St. Augustine.

Luckily for us. For there really has been a flood. There's a whole new world out there, full of challenges and dangers. Kermode may twit its fashionable vocabulary—"mystified," "rigour," "totalizing," "originary"—suggesting that "problematic" might as often as not revert to "problem," and "good poems" might acceptably render "key texts." Confronting five recent books concerning or exemplifying Deconstruction and the New Historicism, he begins, "Anyone presuming to review works of modern literary theory must expect to be depressed by an encounter with large quantities of deformed prose." ("Mortal prose," he'll call it later.) But characteristically, he is not criticizing the practice of "great ones" (his phrase) that began it, but the "servile mimicry" of their followers.

The great ones themselves are another matter. In *History and Value* he was glad to quote Paul de Man in support of a point of his own, and a March 1989 review of de Man's now notorious wartime journalism breathes the detached charity conferred by 2000 miles of ocean. Generously, moderately, Kermode summarizes the horrors and their extenuations, accepts some of these, rejects others, even offers an extra extenuation of his own. He resists the temptation to gloat, even to hint there might be a connection between a commitment to the unavoidable duplicities of language and the avoidable duplicities of a life. De Man's yen for the aporia, his search for "the point where necessity encountered impossibility, or intention its fated undoing," is treated with respect, and "the undecidability of his . . . writing" is accepted as a reflection of "the unavoidable undecidability of language itself."

But this does not make a practical Englishman into a deconstruc-

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tionist. By October of the same year he is writing a particularly thorough and sympathetic account of the arguments of John Ellis' *Against Deconstruction* (see my review in Vol. XLIII, No. 4 of *The Hudson Review*), praising their "clarity and force." Then, to maintain the balance, he suggests that those who "want to adjudicate between Deconstruction and Ellis" should "read or reread the *Grammatology*."

This suggestion is, of course, unlikely to be followed. Derrida is not known for his mastery of the friendship style. But Kermode will not allow their difficulty to excuse the easy dismissal of the great ones by troglodytes who haven't read them, or who have read a bit of them and hated it. Kermode is a hard man on the closed mind. In his single instance of "knocking copy" his target is Dame Helen Gardner, whose "absurdly inaccurate" suggestion that deconstructionists import meanings into texts instead of attending to what they are reading "could hardly have been made by anybody who had read even a few pages of Derrida or of Paul de Man, whose attention to what they are reading is of an intensity beyond . . . Dame Helen's conception." Nor may she dismiss hermeneutics unread. Again, the brisk, careful explanation: it's not an impressive synonym for "interpretation," as she calls it: "it stands to 'interpretation,' roughly as 'philosophy of science' stands to 'science,'; only roughly, because it originally dealt with the rules governing interpretation, and more recently has acquired wider philosophical connotation." Hermeneutics is one of the major headings of recent critical thought; the ways in which interpretation is subject to institutional control, the social arrangements that preserve "the reputation, and the texts and the interpretation" of what is now vexedly called the canon, raise issues to be investigated, not cosily ignored.

Kermode himself is no mean hermeneut. The title essay of *The Uses of Error* is in fact a sermon ("the one and only sermon I have ever preached or ever will preach"), delivered in King's College Chapel, on the irresolvable ambiguity of a text from Job. In the familiar King James Version, Job's wife's response to his misery is to tell him to "curse God, and die." The literal meaning of the Hebrew word, however, is not "curse" but "bless," and that's how St. Jerome translated it into the Latin of the Catholic Vulgate. But "bless God" was in Hebrew a euphemism for "curse God." A Jewish scribe couldn't write such blasphemy, but people (including St. Jerome) knew what was meant, and Job's wife has consequently come down the centuries as a heartless scold. And yet "bless" can be read literally, as it probably was by the Catholic Georges de la Tour, whose painting (reproduced on Kermode's cover) makes Job's wife look quite sympathetic. What to do? Should we fear, with Dame Helen, that "to recognize the possibility of multiple interpretations" destroys any possibility of agreement? We need do no such thing; "the possibility of agreement . . . is a fact of experience." But "the nature of such agreements, and the testing of dissent from them," are matters of genuine, if fashion-

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able, interest, and "should be discussed rather than waved away." Texts, Kermode told the assembly at King's, are preserved, read, misread, read again, according to the needs of individuals and societies. "The history of interpretation, the skills by which we keep alive in our minds the light and the dark of past literature and humanity, is to an incalculable extent a history of error." But having said something quite radical, he characteristically pulls back: "Or perhaps it would be better to say, of ambiguity, of antithetical senses," of "fruitful misunderstanding" which, like de la Tour's, we should welcome rather than fear, because it gives rise to the rich mysteries of art.

Thus does the superb reviewer busy himself at the humble task of Arnoldian diffusion. Why does he bother? Because, I think, in an age in which the Sea of Faith has even further receded, it is finally, for him as for Arnold, art and literature that provide his articles of belief. As he paraphrases E. M. Forster, he speaks also for himself. Forster, he says, believed that "experiences of value in art . . . were like religion, in that anybody who had them *needed* to hand them on, whether by teaching or criticism, however imperfect." That, I think, is the impulse behind both Frank Kermode's donnish writings, and his reviews.

ACADEMIC CAPITALISM & LITERARY VALUE

Harold Fromm

Confronting some of the most heated issues in the literary academy, Harold Fromm charges that the critical practices dominating the liberal arts in recent years have subordinated literature to unethical ends. In the hands of some feminists, Marxists, new historicists, and others, he says, literature has become a commodity over which self-aggrandizing interests are struggling for control. Beneath an aura of revolutionary virtue, Fromm contends, these critics are as entrepreneurial and politically self-centered as the capitalistic and patriarchal systems they denounce.

"Anyone who cares about the fate of literature in this age of academic theory-mongering will be grateful for [Fromm's] sensitive and humane analysis."—Roger Kimball

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ROBERT SCHULTZ

Poetry and Knowledge

BECAUSE SO MUCH RECENT ACADEMIC CRITICISM turns texts upon themselves, undermining apparent meanings, it is out of fashion to talk about what poets know. Though we understand very well how language itself generates permutations of thought and feeling, at this moment it is theoretically difficult to acknowledge that some of our experience darts in from outside language, demanding the new poem which can express it. It is true that poems beget poems, but it is also true that the poet often feels that he or she is seeking an exact formula of words, a precise cadence and a color of diction that in some mysterious way can "match" a sense impression or emotion which feels as though it arrives from a prelinguistic source. If our moment's critical vocabulary cannot describe the reality of this experience, then to develop such a vocabulary must be the theorists' next project.

According to the most advanced theories, poetry can say nothing that is not ultimately about language. But if a poet writes believing that all his or her discoveries are ultimately about poetry itself, that poet will produce bad or minor art. And if we don't experience, in our reading, the sense of "seeing through" to natural and human realities, however problematic, then we do not receive what we have always gone to art to find. Art preoccupied with itself is a small thing, and poems read only for what they tell us about the dilemmas of epistemology finally all say: "Knowing is impossible" and "Author and reader cannot connect." Fortunately, most of our poets persist in feeling that poetry has something to do with discovery and communication. They are a rash group, after all, having kept on writing despite widespread reports of the death of the author. Until the theorists refigure the lines of connection among author, audience, text, and world, "practical" criticism must continue to speak plainly about the subjects of poems and the knowledge of poets.

Cynthia Macdonald is one of the strongest, most interesting poets now writing precisely because she understands that ours is a moment of radical doubt. And she has fashioned a highly original, exuberant poetry which can tremble on the brink of chaos, acknowledging all the theoretical impossibilities of knowledge and communication, and yet overcome them with artfulness and moral force. Since the publication of her first book in 1972, Macdonald's work has probed contemporary darkness with elegant word play, broad puns, wide-ranging allusions,

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outlandish dream-like stories, and eerie fables. *Living Wills*,[1] her fifth book, is a collection of new and selected earlier poems arranged into a summative volume with its own logic and coherence.

Macdonald's sequence, "Alternate Means of Transport," which concludes the current volume, is one of the strongest long poems to appear in the past decade. In it she admits that we live in the dark and notes that: "Visible badges of sanctity litter / The spangled heavens long after / What we value them for is extinct. . . ." Yet, even if old modes of knowing and old ideas of sanctity are found by most to be untenable, there is a recognition in the poem's last lines that even the most outworn sentiments and conceptions may be, in practical terms, our final resort:

> Poems lavish with the language of light wing through a time when
> We are in the dark, illuminated by static, by the electricity
>
> Of the synthetic, love—a plain song, a plaint—is asked
> To do more than it can. It is, perhaps, what we have left.

Story is the prime way of knowing in Macdonald's work. And the stories she has chosen to tell in her wildly associative and rigorously intelligent poems often render a strangeness which exposes the familiar. As she writes in "Celebrating the Freak": "The freak wears on the outside what we conceal." And so, poems such as "The Stained Glass Woman," "The Kilgore Rangerette," and "News of the Death of the World's Biggest Man" are condensed tragicomedies told with a remarkable combination of hilarity, sympathy, and psychoanalytic insight.

If some contemporary poems seem like short stories cut to their essence, several of Macdonald's read like distilled novels. Often, Macdonald moves through a broad time frame, following intricate patterns of cause and effect, tracing lines of moral implication. One of her newest poems, "Accidental Causes," constructs the story of a woman who wants to kill herself without suspicion of suicide ("Her children must not know"). After long deliberation, she walks in a park during a storm, carrying a picnic basket and a copy of *Anna Karenina* (her only hint), until she is finally struck by lightning. The carefully arranged act, Macdonald concludes, "is a certain form of rectitude, a certain way of / Lying which lets the living live, protected by the dying."

Another new poem, "The Sounding Cataract," probes the same theme of knowledge and ignorance as it gradually reveals the story of a young woman who, as a child, was molested by her father, and now has had her cat horribly drowned by an abusive man who lives in the

[1] LIVING WILLS, by *Cynthia Macdonald*. Alfred A. Knopf. $21.95.

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apartment below her. The mother who long ago refused to recognize what was going on before her eyes is implicated in the widening guilt. This intricate but efficient poem derives uncanny power from its multiplicity of perspectives, as the points of view of daughter, mother, and downstairs neighbor all are registered. At the same time, the whole is overlaid by a filigree of word play that chillingly echoes the language of childhood and innocence, playing upon the words "cat" and the two meanings of "cataract": "This is a cat. And this is a cataract / Whose water veils the end of the story / Because there is blindness necessary for survival." In these new poems, a powerful note of moral outrage has entered Macdonald's poetry, a fierceness of judgment that breaks through her previous analytic detachment. Throughout this book, but particularly in the newest poems, the poet works toward the terrible knowledge of acts and consequences.

In Diane Ackerman's new and selected poems, *Jaguar of Sweet Laughter*,[2] knowledge is experience. She is an explorer and adventurer, attempting to know the world in its greatest dimensions and minutest particulars. As much a traveler and geographer as Elizabeth Bishop, Ackerman is less pensive, more enthusiastic. Among the new poems there are juxtaposed sections about Amazonia and Antarctica, and in the poems about the tropics she has found a congenial terrain that allows her to display her impressive powers of description. The lushness of rain forest and river match the extravagance of her imagination and gratify her desire for fullness of experience:

> Dawn on the Amazon. The sun wobbles
> like a thick red caramel. Among the trees,
> a fidgeting chorus of bright birds squawk
> anthems of love, sunlight and trouble.
> Wet ropes twisting into a chirpy screech
> are parakeets. Toucans yap like dogs, and hawks
> blurt loud kazoos, while doves swoon and gargle.
> "In the Rain Forest"

Significantly, when she turns her attention to the icy cipher of Antarctica, she personifies it, projecting upon it a desire that is hot and animal. This is not a poet of frozen wastes. In "Antarctica Offers Scott Her Lantern," the continent pleads: "I am so cold tonight. Lend me your fever / to mull my long pastures of crumbling ice. / Warm the jagged mountains in my spine / that now shiver with cold."

Ackerman uses the vocabulary of science frequently and with precision, but her approach to the world is as much sensual as scientific. One of the interesting features of Ackerman's project, in fact, is the way she recovers the bodily allure of science, which, after

[2] JAGUAR OF SWEET LAUGHTER, by *Diane Ackerman*. Random House. $18.00.

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all, began with the love of empiricism for the things we can know by the senses. In "Night Letter to Loren Eiseley," she praises his "way of beholding / which is a form of prayer," but such prayer, for Ackerman, does not leave the body behind. She is downright metaphysical in her conjunction of science and sex at the meeting place of sensual knowing. And, as a poet of experience, she writes about sex with refreshing gusto.

Ackerman is rhapsodic, unmisgiving, venturesome, and various, and so she is a poet who takes risks. When she fails it is in her tendency toward the rhetorical and essayistic, with metaphors applied like a decorative stucco, as in "Nuclear Winter" and "Ode to the Alien." When she misses, her exuberance can seem willed, the inventive similes forced, and she can seem a poet more of fancy than imagination. Stylistically, she is so consistently revved-up that some readers may find the verse cloying. But Ackerman herself is aware of her impatience with the merely quotidian. In her sonnet, "Quixote," she states her position:

> People chide
> me for being short of sense, but *they* are
> short of wonder. Inbred. Inert. In cahoots. In lieu.
> They spend their lives like dull brass coins,
> while I crack open a world or two . . .

Jaguar of Sweet Laughter is a generous book, containing 100 pages of new poems along with selections from Ackerman's previous four volumes of poetry. It is generous, too, in its emotional amplitude. Ackerman is all for life, refreshing for her rapturous attachment to the physical world.

While Ackerman moves out into energetic engagement, Linda Gregg's instinct in *The Sacraments of Desire*[3] is often for withdrawal, solitude, and contemplation. These two poets, in fact, are virtual opposites. Ackerman is taken by the variousness of the world; Gregg pursues simplicity and purity. Ackerman's language is always in the foreground, inventive and chattering, lively as a tree full of birds; Gregg's is poised and hushed, evocative of a longed-for silence. Ackerman is a poet of activity, of verbs (turning to a page at random I find "stole," "gurgled," "charged," "bluffed," "scrawmed," and "sieves" in the first ten lines); Gregg is a poet of stillness and nouns (the most prevalent verbs in her work are the forms of "to be"). Ackerman is fully immersed in the world of becoming; Gregg desires a perfection of being.

As a poet of purity, silence, and being, Gregg often writes about the self alone. The book's first section presents her in retreat on a Greek

[3] THE SACRAMENTS OF DESIRE, by *Linda Gregg*. Graywolf Press. $14.95.

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island seeking remnants of a revivifying goddess. In the poem "To Be Like That" she states her purpose: "Anything to move ahead, to get there. / Wanting to be licked clean by the rough tongue / of what She is. Searching for it. / Leaving cow, carcass and blood to enter silence, / to go to the island and stand among olive trees. . . ." Her vocation is to know and celebrate "What comes to flower and bears. Lovers, poets, fools / like singers for that world which will not come to me. / The lack which I am. Which gives me speech. / My voice as clues to Her absent grace" ("Tokens of What She Is"). Speech is of desire, so the end of Gregg's singing is, paradoxically, to achieve the silence of fulfillment. Similarly, movement comes from desire, so the poet often dreams of stillness. Gregg registers many arresting moments—"Euridyce Saved," the most frankly mythic poem in the collection, presents one of the sharpest—but there are dangers in a poetry of arrest.

The syntax of stasis which pervades Gregg's poems can be tiresome. The stolid verb "is" recurs with distracting frequency, and her preference for it and for short direct sentences permits little variety in sentence structure. Also, Gregg often divides clauses from kernel sentences with full stops ("I will tell him / it is possible to live here. / That poverty makes the bountiful real. / Makes the moon hold still as I have seen it") until the gesture becomes a mannerism. All these devices contribute to a flat, portentous tone, the rhetoric of no rhetoric, poetry as mute gesture. It is as though, intent on a fragile poise, Gregg resists articulation and ramification.

For all her poems of solitude and meditation, Gregg is at her best in narrative poems that involve others. Even when she renders a moment of solitary fulfillment—drying in the sun after a bath—the reader may feel that his or her act of witnessing must validate the moment. I feel like an invited voyeur when I read in the book's opening poem: "When I return naked to the stone porch, / there is no one to see me glistening." Gregg escapes from a sometimes claustrophobic self-regard and frees her powers of observation when she turns them outward. "Life on the Rio Escondido," "Inside the War," "The Design Inside Them," and "*Esta*" are closely observed, strongly empathic poems about others. And when a narrative element enters the poems, Gregg deftly notes the telling gesture. Perhaps Gregg's sensibility has been sharpened by introspection, but it comes more fully into its own in the world among others.

William Stafford's sensibility has formed itself around moments of discovery in solitude, but his moments are different from Gregg's—equally mystical perhaps, but less shadowed and haunted. There is a strong current of serenity in Stafford's ninth book, *Passwords*,[4] despite

[4] PASSWORDS, by *William Stafford*. HarperCollins Publishers. $10.95p.

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its many poems of elegy. And this serenity is grounded in several poems which render a hospitable calm in the natural world.

At least since his poem "Representing Far Places" in *Travelling Through the Dark* (1962), Stafford has explicitly stated his identification with wilderness rather than society. In the current volume he evokes deep woods as a place of origin or retreat. In "Atavism," for instance, the forest is our evolutionary home:

> A walk through the forest strokes your fur,
> the fur you no longer have. And your gaze
> down a forest aisle is a strange, long
> plunge, dark eyes looking for home.
> For delicious minutes you can feel your whiskers
> wider than your mind, away out over everything.

In other poems the natural world overcomes human ambition, outflanking anxiety by promoting a shift in perspective. Sometimes the moment is gently humorous, as in the one-quatrain poem "At the Aesthetics Meeting": "We invented shape after shape, / color moving to and fro; / then outside where the plain world lives / it began to snow." At other times tranquility is communicated by rendering the unhurried steadiness of natural process. Here, the poet synchronizes his breath with the progress of the day:

> This deliberate day eased
> past the calendar and waited. Patiently
> the sun instructed shadows how to move;
> it held them, guided their gradual defining.
> In the great quiet I carried my life on,
> in again, out again.

In a possible riposte to Beckett, the author *par excellence* of modern *angst*, Stafford has titled the poem which contains these lines "Waiting for God."

Among the lyrics, jokes, and elegies of *Passwords*, there is a program at work, announced by the book's title poem, which begins, "Might people stumble and wander / for not knowing the right words, / and get lost in their wandering?" The poem, which prefaces the collection, ends: "Here is a package, / a program of passwords. / It is to bring strangers together." Stafford's poems succeed as passwords when they provide us with images and events which dramatize his orienting moments and so give us access to the sources of his security. There are poems, however, in which a state of mind is not dramatized, but is merely asserted. In "Yes" the language is so general it cannot carry us to assent:

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It could happen any time, tornado,
earthquake, Armageddon. It could happen.
Or sunshine, love, salvation.

It could, you know. That's why we wake
and look out—no guarantees
in this life.

But some bonuses, like morning,
like right now, like noon,
like evening.

And in "It's All Right," after a catalogue of significant misfortunes, is there any tone of voice by which this passage can be made credible: "But just when the worst bears down / you find a pretty bubble in your soup at noon, / and outside at work a bird says, 'Hi!'"? When the poetry loses its rigor, the transport and peace effectively dramatized in other poems relax into mere complacency.

Over his long and distinguished career, Stafford has become much more a poet of the plain style than he was in his first books, and that plainness can occasionally—though not frequently—slip into banality. It is interesting to note that this does not happen when he encounters the resistance of prescribed form. There is a good sonnet here ("Life Work"), and the excellent pantoum, "The Summer We Didn't Die," may be the collection's best poem. Mastery of enjambment, syntax, and pacing make this poem slide effortlessly through the form's demanding repetitions as it evokes the flaring timelessness of childhood. Overall, this is a highly personal—even intimate—book suffused with good will and the intention to comfort.

Like the books by Gregg and Stafford, *The Really Short Poems of A. R. Ammons*[5] is a book of moments. It collects 160 poems from throughout Ammons' career, none of them more than a page long, and most consisting of fewer than a dozen lines. With the earlier books, *The Selected Poems: Expanded Edition* and *Selected Longer Poems*, the current collection gathers poems of a particular wavelength, showing what Ammons has been able to transmit at that frequency.

The disarming title seems to promise a collection of light verse. And the poem "Quit That" warns: "I don't / want to // be taken / seriously except // that I / want my // wish not / to be // taken seriously / to be // taken seriously." And, indeed, the book contains a humor that ranges through wittiness and rue to outright hilarity. There are one-liners ("Coward": "Bravery runs in my family"), two-liners ("Their Sex Life": "One failure on / Top of another"), and witty aphorisms ("Theory Center": "Poetry if / not the // criticism of / life is // the life

[5] THE REALLY SHORT POEMS OF A. R. AMMONS, by *A. R. Ammons*. W. W. Norton & Company. $17.95.

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/ of criticism"). And readers may laugh out loud at the way Ammons tweaks Wordsworth in the poem, "Swoggled." Those familiar only with the often-anthologized poems such as "Corson's Inlet," "The City Limits," or "The Arc Inside and Out" will find another dimension of the poet in his jokes, but humor is only a small part of what goes on in this book.

The short poem traditionally has accommodated song, spare metaphor, sheer image, maxim, and brief proverb—and all of these are in the short poems by Ammons. In subject matter, there are poems about science, metaphysics, religion, education, art, sex, death, and, as one would expect from this poet of inner and outer weather, a multitude of poems growing out of the close observation of nature. Many of these poems have in common the act of attention seizing upon the momentary, perceiving the large in the minute, the general principle in the local instance.

Equilibrations

If you walk back
and forth

through a puddle pretty
soon

you wet the whole
driveway but of

course dry
the puddle up.

As with the poem just quoted, some of these moments may seem less than momentous. There is, in fact, an element of the perverse running through Ammons' work, as he regards the disregarded, centers on the peripheral, and signifies with the insignificant. And this enlivening, liberating perversity extends to his vocabulary and prosody, as he runs fluid sentences through jagged enjambments, often treating high matters with low diction and low with high. It is as though he has drawn into his sensibility a commitment to irony, paradox, and doubleness from the world's essential physics, which he has seen to consist of alternations, balancings, and compensations.

It is interesting to note how some of Ammons' abiding themes have found expression in their briefest form, and one of the themes which recurs most frequently in the "really short" poems is his sense of the ironic duality of things. The problem of unity versus multiplicity, central to the longer poems, receives its succinct statement in "Roundel"; the interpenetration of things is figured in the wind revealed by

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a field of reeds in "Small Song"; and nature's economy of compensations is read in "Mediation":

> The grove kept us dry,
> subtracting from
> the shower much
> immediacy;
>
> but then distracted us
> for hours, dropping
> snaps faint as the twigs
> of someone coming.

This poem notes not only the physics of volume and rate, but also, among human affairs, the way every piece of good fortune must be paid for. Even natural beauty has its price:

> Providence
>
> To stay
> bright as
> if just
> thought of
> earth requires
> only that
> nothing stay

The Really Short Poems of A. R. Ammons reveals new aspects of the poet and shows his familiar themes and methods struck as if in medallions, but one should not expect to find Ammons' greatest work in these miniatures. Between his longest compositions and these single strokes there is a rich middle in the main body of the lyric poems, where the instinct for completeness and the demands of compression tug and contend. But this book is a pleasure to browse for its striking perceptions and deeply humane knowledge.

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ANDREW HUDGINS

Poetry Chronicle

JORIE GRAHAM IS A POET DRIVEN BY IDEAS, and in her new book *Region of Unlikeness,*[1] a title unfortunately close to Robert Lowell's *Land of Unlikeness*, the ideas are variations and elaborations of the same complex of ideas developed in her previous books. Relentlessly she probes what it means to live in the flesh, and therefore subject to time, decay, and death while art and abstraction exert an almost irresistible attraction on her because they are fixed, still, eternal. But the life of the mind is also a form of death because art and ideas are, by their natures, at a remove from life and separated from it. The result is an intellectual double bind: incarnation in the flesh leads invariably to death while art is an eternal but unliving simulacrum of life. For the first time, the dilemma deeply charges the voice of Graham's poems. And to a love of art as idea, derived from Stevens, and a love for the artistic ideas of Yeats, we can now add an intense, trapped, almost frantic voice that echoes Sylvia Plath ("Is that a translator. No. / Is it an intruder? No, no. / It's hard labor, this need to work the whole ground / and *leave it exhausted*").

Graham grapples with these ideas, as well as other more currently fashionable ideas about the failure of meaning and the radical subjectivity of perception, not as an intellectual exercise and not with nihilistic joy. She fights them from the inside, with a real despair at being able to escape their traps. In "Immobilism" she evokes Eliot's "The Wasteland" when she considers what it means to be

> entombed in being unless I can make it
> out,
> trying to find the front now, the face—
>
> Shall I take thee?
> Shall I take thee to the word?
>
> It darts, it stretches out along the dry hard ground,
> it cannot find the end, it darts, it stretches out—

The "it" of the last two lines is not only the word but, as we are told earlier, what the word represents: "the tiny wind" of the quickened present moment.

[1] REGION OF UNLIKENESS, by *Jorie Graham.* Ecco. $17.50.

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Graham's poems themselves have also been more than a bit uneasy in their bodies, the ideas unwilling to give themselves up to line, embodiment, shape—whether that shape is the stiff, tidy-looking shape of the poem in her early books or the new book's irregular lines that suddenly shift from long sprawling lines to the over-emphatic isolation of one word on a line. The book as a whole also seems like a very fine eighty-page book trapped in the bagginess of its one hundred twenty-five pages. Graham seems to be shifting her attention from the fixed, well-crafted poem to a more fluid open process that extends across individual poems and through the entire book. But the considerable power she draws from her integrated vision and the digressive interweaving of themes, images, and ideas comes at the cost of some slackness and repetition. In poems like "Detail of the Creation," Graham's ideas are beautifully woven into the poem and give it an intellectual weight that is rare in good contemporary poems. In other poems, like "Who Watches from the Dark Porch," the ideas blur into a virtual litany of abstractions as if they can hardly wait to shake off the constraints of scene, character, description and imagery, and move into pure philosophy. At her best, though, Graham, like no other living American poet, finds great passion in ideas, emotion in intellect. In one of the great moments in modern poetry, Wallace Stevens in "The Idea of Order at Key West" suddenly cries out for knowledge: "Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know. . . ." At the end of "At the Cabaret *Now*" Jorie Graham too calls out: "Tell me / why did we live, lord? / Blood in a wind, / why were we meant to live?" The use of the past tense is just one haunting aspect of these powerful lines.

In *The Cinnamon Peeler: Selected Poems* Michael Ondaatje,[2] who is better known as a fiction writer and memoirist than as a poet, derives a certain amount of interest and power from the skills a good fiction writer brings to poetry: intelligence, wit, good humor, lack of pretension, the ability to strike interesting phrases, and a gift for story and anecdote. But he also brings the shortcomings one might expect from a fiction writer: slack rhythms, lines that are really more chopped-up prose than poetry, and great difficulty with endings, which too often are sentimental, portentous, or flip. A number of these liabilities come together in the not-atypical ending of "Late Movies with Skyler": "In the movies of my childhood the heroes / after skilled swordplay and moral victories / leave with absolutely nothing / to do for the rest of their lives."

The most successful poems are straightforward narratives like "Burning Hills," in which the story takes such prominence that the prosy rhythms become less problematic. But the book also contains poems that are in control of line and rhythm. "Dates" begins with the

[2] THE CINNAMON PEELER: Selected Poems, by *Michael Ondaatje*. Alfred A. Knopf. $19.00.

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speaker humorously lamenting that "My birth was heralded by nothing / but the anniversary of Winston Churchill's marriage" and then going on to find solace in knowing that during his eighth month in his mother's womb, Wallace Stevens was writing "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard." The end of the poem is clearly, beautifully written:

> That night while my mother slept
> her significant belly cooled
> by the bedroom fan
> Stevens put words together
> that grew to sentences
> and shaved them clean and
> shaped them, the page suddenly
> becoming thought where nothing had been,
> his head making his hand
> move where he wanted
> and he saw his hand saying
> the mind is never finished, no, never
> and I in my mother's stomach was growing
> as were the flowers outside the Connecticut windows.

Pamela Alexander's *Commonwealth of Wings*, which is subtitled *An Ornithological Biography, Based on the Life of John James Audubon*,[3] sets itself difficult obstacles to overcome. It evokes direct comparison to Robert Penn Warren's *Audubon: A Vision*, one of the very best poems published since World War II, and though *Commonwealth of Wings* is a good book it doesn't reach the heights of Penn Warren's masterpiece. Alexander's book can occasionally seem over-determined and even claustrophobic as almost every poem has some sort of bird reference, bird image, or bird allusion. And, like many biographies, the book moves slowly as Alexander works through the exposition of Audubon's early life while she develops the voice her version of Audubon will speak. But what a good voice it is—a flexible, adroit, nuanced approximation of the nineteenth-century artist's, with just the right hint of the French Caribbean in the early poems, a hint that diminishes but never entirely vanishes from the rhythms of his speech. Though all the poems have a strong sense of story, wonderful details, and a fine sense of line and pacing, the overall drama of the book doesn't come into focus until about halfway through, when Audubon returns from a lengthy trip to Great Britain, where he has successfully sought a printer for *Birds of America*. Then, when he has to reacquaint himself with his wife and family, the theme of the uneasy compatibility of life and art acquires an emotional charge that it sustains till the end of the book. Audubon loves his wife Lucy, but

[3] COMMONWEALTH OF WINGS: An Ornithological Biography, Based on the Life of John James Audubon, by *Pamela Alexander*. Wesleyan University Press. $9.95p.

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he also loves his art, which draws him into the wilderness to hunt, shoot, and paint birds. "I am Restless despite Myself" ends "I will not go yet awhile / Lucy, I cannot change this now, / I come and go—." In a later poem he describes himself with wit and touching self-acceptance:

> I have been mistaken as a Quaker
> because of my speech & habits of Industry
> and now a long white beard
> adds to the impression—Dunker, then.
> Carpenter, farmer,
> hunter. And scientist, man
> who has made a home on the earth. Husband.

But Alexander has a fine cool eye. She doesn't let sentiment undermine her story. On his deathbed, Audubon calls for his hunting dogs by name—"Plato? Zephyr? Dash?"—and yet cannot recognize his wife: "but remember birds can see us too *la la / Bon soir, madame, / bon soir*. Who are you?"

Deborah Larsen's *Stitching Porcelain* also comes with an historical subtitle: *After Matteo Ricci in Sixteenth-Century China*.[4] While Pamela Alexander recreates the voice of John James Audubon, Larsen uses her historical material, the life of the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci, as a scaffold for *her* language, *her* lyricism. The poems move so far from narrative into lyricism that Larsen has felt it necessary to include marginal glosses to help the reader keep the story straight. The book is somewhat reminiscent of Berryman's "Homage to Mistress Bradstreet" with the language also reflecting the influence of another Jesuit, Gerard Manley Hopkins. Though very well-written and interesting, the first two sections of the book pretty much exist to provide a context for the book's *tour de force*, "Blue Lights," a seventeen-section poem, during which Ricci, on his deathbed, reflects on everything that has come before. In section sixteen, Ricci remembers the lashed backs of the Chinese workmen who pulled his boat through canal locks. In its word choice, the poem specifically tips its hat to Hopkins, while the last line echoes Yeats's rhythm:

> They loom there . . .
> These are the pied men,
> the men brindled as Roman flagellants
> on Maundy Thursday. They move us
> up the tumid water. Their backs are firewalkers'
> feet; their backs are dappled landscapes, graphs,
> quilts, ploughed fields, and cracking clay.
> Their hooded, staring eyes are everywhere.

[4] STITCHING PORCELAIN: After Matteo Ricci in Sixteenth-Century China, by *Deborah Larsen*. New Directions. $9.95p.

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To my mind, Ricci never comes alive as a character, but Larsen possesses a dense and lively lyrical gift that overwhelms that objection—or at least puts it on hold, while we glory in the writing itself. It is easy to believe that Larsen speaks as much for herself as for Ricci when she has him say, "By the fixed-and-flashing light / I would tack the zigzag course / right upwind and into the straits / so that I sing this history's coming about."

The outward gaze of George Bradley's *Of the Knowledge of Good and Evil*[5] is, at first, refreshing. But over the course of the book he can begin to seem a bit too detached, too Olympian. Bradley, though, knows exactly what he is about. In "Keats' Handkerchief" he argues that beauty in the abstract—even the horrible beauty formed by the blood that the dying Keats has coughed into a handkerchief—can return us to the human condition with greater sympathy and love:

> If you could sever yourself from its full significance
> It might seem even beautiful, the gleaming bead of blood
> As rare as gemstone, a ruby of the finest water,
> Bright as Betelgeuse in the glittering cloth of night.
> Stare awhile, and then put the handkerchief away;
> Take up your brother's hand, who lies in pain,
> For poor Tom is dying too.

While I'm not really persuaded by the logic of the poem, despite the canny equivocation of that impossible "if," the writing is beautiful and it is clear that Bradley himself is almost convinced by his tentative *ars poetica*.

Bradley is strongly influenced by Merrill and Auden, and the poems also contain subtle but persistent echoes of Pope, echoes that are as delightful as they are surprising in contemporary poetry. "Chaos, the Theory" ends this way: "Our creed is chaos, its sudden starts and jagged edge: / We asseverate each thought is of unimagined potency, / We appoint each grain of sand the fulcrum of its age." In addition to the philosophical side of Pope, Bradley has also learned from Pope, the master of the wit of the dying fall. The speaker of "The Year of the Comet" stares into the night sky, trying to see Halley's comet, then he gives up and goes back into the house: "I went back inside / To soothe chagrin with thoughts that I had tried / To see it, that the world had grown too old / For auguries, and that my toes were cold." But the self-consciously reticent lightness with which he writes about himself in a breezy poem like "The Year of the Comet" can, in another poem, too easily turn into something uncomfortably close to doggerel ("So that just as I propose a toast, / Our electricity

[5] OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL, by *George Bradley*. Alfred A. Knopf. $19.00.

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gives up the ghost"), or veer off into a tone that seems weirdly, inappropriately jocular:

> The ocean leapt across Westhampton Beach
> To raze the shingle summer homes it found
> While residents, left clinging each to each,
> Were swept away and for the most part drowned. . . .

Without losing his formidable wit, Bradley might benefit as a poet by taking himself almost as seriously as he does the rest of the world.

At his best, though, he is a highly accomplished poet with a wide range. Both parody and affectionate tribute, "The 4*th* of July, and" is a generously witty goodbye to New York written in the style of the "New York School" of poets. In a very different mode, "Deformation Professionnelle" meditates on how artists may transcend their human limitations in the act of art but they must return to them when the performance ends. After hanging for "a gorgeous instant in space, / leaning into the light," the ballerina

> descends again to a blaze
> Of shooting pain and bloody bandages;
> And we also descend, out of the unlimited,
> Alien air, to the observable friction
> And scarcely concealed sorrow of our lives.

Except for the addition of fifteen poems culled from *Sweet Will* (1985) and *A Walk with Tom Jefferson* (1988), Philip Levine's *New Selected Poems*[6] is identical with his *Selected Poems* (1984), right down to pagination and typeface. *New Selected Poems*, which serves to consolidate the poet's move from his previous publisher to Knopf, will be of interest primarily to readers new to Levine's poetry. *New Selected Poems* was published simultaneously with *What Work Is*,[7] a frequently brilliant collection of new poems. The book's recurrent metaphor for work is burning, a metaphor that is introduced in the first poem, "Fear and Fame." After cleaning pickling tanks with a "burning stew" of acids, a worker emerges from the tanks and removes his protective gear: "Ahead lay the second cigarette, held in a shaking hand, / as I took into myself the sickening heat to quell heat, / a lunch of two Genoa salami sandwiches and Swiss cheese / on heavy peasant bread baked by my Aunt Tsipie, / and a third cigarette to kill the taste of the others." Perhaps speaking for the poet too, the vat cleaner returns to his work "stiffened / by the knowledge that to descend and rise up / from the other world merely once in eight hours is half / what it takes to be known among women and men." The ending is evocative, but

[6] NEW SELECTED POEMS, by *Philip Levine*. Alfred A. Knopf. $24.00.
[7] WHAT WORK IS, by *Philip Levine*. Alfred A. Knopf. $19.00.

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opaque. To attain fame, this Orpheus who returns from his eight-hour shift in the burning underworld will require something beyond his labor, but what is it—talent, luck, something else?

In another fine poem, "Fire," a father thinks of his son who is off fighting a forest fire and he, the father, vicariously experiences "on my skin, a light oil, a sweat / born of some forgotten leaning into fire." Fire turns to smoke again in "On the River," in which the speaker's brother once a week uses his lunch hour ("his only free time") to row out onto the Detroit River so he can look "with a painter's eye" at the industrial landscape and see "beneath the shadows / of concrete and burned brick towers / the flickering hints of life." The speaker speculates that his brother performs this weekly ritual so he can "behold his own life / come into view brick by dark brick, / bending his back for all its worth, / as the whole thing goes up in smoke." The metaphorical equation of work with burning becomes tendentious in "Burnt," a long poem that constitutes the third section of the book. Though the poem contains some of the best, most compelling writing in the book, as a whole it inclines toward slackness; and the weaker sections, which could easily have been omitted, undermine the good ones.

Occasionally Levine goes on auto-pilot and becomes Philip Levine, tough-guy poet and voice of the common man. You can hear this voice clearly in the title of the book: *What Work Is*. He knows, you don't, and he's going to tell you. A poem in this mode might begin with an abrupt tough-guy self-righteousness that asserts the speaker's superior sensitivity to the travails of the worker ("Take this quiet woman, she has been / standing before a polishing wheel / for over three hours, and she lacks / twenty minutes before she can take a lunch break. Is she a woman?") and end with heart-of-gold sentimentality (". . . she places the five / tapering fingers of her filthy hand / on the arm of your white shirt to mark / you for her own, now and forever"). Another tough-guy ending is the tossed-off cheap shot, such as the conclusion of "Gin," which takes a gratuitous swipe at "the military and political victories / of Dwight Eisenhower, who brought us / Richard Nixon with wife and dog. / Any wonder we tried gin." But such easy preaching to the converted is largely absent from *What Work Is*. The book is full of lovely, powerful, surprising poems that reaffirm Levine as one of poetry's contemporary masters and the inventor of a distinctive verse line that riffs off of an iambic rhythm while its crisp line breaks derive from Levine's early work with syllabics. The poems in the book's fourth and final section are uniformly superb. Especially incisive, unflinching, funny and compassionate is "The Sweetness of Bobby Hefka." The poem begins with Bobby Hefka sitting in a high school classroom "admitting to Mr. Jaslow / that he was a racist and if Mr. Jaslow / was so tolerant how come he couldn't tolerate Bobby?" Through a funny, heartbreaking series of turns that never seem contrived, the poem manages to end "Bobby Hefka loved me." In *What Work Is* Philip Levine is a superb poet working at the top of his form.

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WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

Family Ties

In 1947 F. O. Matthiessen, author of a recent book on Henry James's fiction (*Henry James: The Major Phase*, 1944) brought out *The James Family*, an account of—as Matthiessen put it—"a family of minds." It was a handsome production, illustrated with numerous excellent photographs and consisting of selections from the writings of Henry James Senior and three of his five offspring—William, Henry, and Alice. Connecting them was Matthiessen's sensitive commentary, which took its clue from Henry the novelist's preference for "the scenic method." The stage director was Matthiessen, who saw to it that his actors were assembled in "significant and representative scenes," and who showed a delicate sense of when, as director, he should speak, or be silent and let his remarkable characters do the talking. *The James Family* was conceived on the old life-and-letters formula that had been used so effectively in G. O. Trevelyan's life of Macaulay, or F. W. Maitland's of Leslie Stephen. Except that the plurality of subjects and diversity of their contributions—from essay, to diary, to excerpts from *The Principles of Psychology*, to letters between Henry and William about the other's work—made a quite exceptional challenge. Matthiessen met it brilliantly, but the book has been long out of print and is unlikely to become available again, certainly not in the spacious Knopf format of half a century ago.

At the outset of R.W.B Lewis' "family narrative," he acknowledges his former teacher, Matthiessen, as an "indispensable precursor."[1] For years one had heard about Lewis' project and suspected he might have entertained second thoughts about its own indispensability. After all, there is no lack of documentation on the Jameses: Edel's biography of Henry, and his editions of the letters and notebooks; various biographical and critical studies of William; Jean Strouse's highly-regarded life of Alice. Could one more telling of their collective story be perhaps too much of a good thing? More pointedly, could Mr. Lewis function as a writerly presence distinct and interesting enough to navigate the ambitious voyage among these difficult geniuses, while saying enough new about them to make the trip worth it?

The answer is affirmative, though this reader had his moments of

[1] THE JAMES FAMILY: A Family Narrative, by *R.W.B. Lewis*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $35.00.

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flagging. Lewis' past books are not remarkable for the provocativeness of their literary criticism; he has seemed happier when pursuing a biographical theme or exploring symbolic and mythological patterns. In the preface to *The Jameses* he explains why, although he will take up many texts, they will not be considered merely for themselves:

> The emphasis is in all cases on the personal aspects of the work in question, what it may reveal about the writer or suggest about a family predisposition; cumulatively, what it came variously to mean to be "Jamesian"—or, as William once put it, "a native of the James family."

He admits that such a perspective may be limiting, but also rewarding inasmuch as the Jameses were so extraordinarily "family-minded, family conscious," and wrote and speculated so much about "the whole phenomenon of family." He even hopes that—in a story which stretches from the progenitor, William James of Albany, who came from Ireland and settled in New York State after the Revolutionary War, to his grandson William's death in 1910 and its aftermath—some sense of an American epoch can be conveyed.[2]

Lewis is nothing if not equable. He takes pains not to ride an interpretation which will insist that something is this way rather than that. He has no interest in being controversial or spiky in his judgments, and he often mediates between the idiom in which one of the Jameses expresses something and what a contemporary reader might say in response. For example, one of the most interesting things about Henry Sr.'s relation to his children, especially to William and Henry, was his disinclination to have them too quickly choose a career. Before Henry Jr. became a novelist he spent a year studying law at Harvard—a most unlikely thing for him to do, it now seems. William was even more uncertain, moving from painting, which he studied under the American painter William Morris Hunt, to science (he accompanied Louis Agassiz on a voyage to South America), to medicine, psychology, and philosophy. In Henry's autobiographical volume, *Notes of a Son and Brother*, he recalls his father's uneasiness about "any particular successful filial activity," since it "dispensed with any suggestion of an alternative." Henry imagined his father saying rather that his sons were to *be* rather than to *do*—"to be something, something unconnected with specific doing, something free and uncommitted, something finer in short than being *that*, whatever it was, might consist of." This is, of course, a charming way for the novelist to have understood his father's dubiousness about William's

[2] It seems odd to me that William's death, rather than Henry's (five years later) is Lewis' chosen point of conclusion. In an appendix where he deals at some length with family descendants in this century, he devotes a couple of paragraphs to Henry's stroke and subsequent death, but seems not particularly interested in writing about it.

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painterly attempts, or about his own (Henry Jr.'s) "surrender" to fiction writing as "unnecessarily restrictive."

At this point Lewis intervenes, opining that with our contemporary prejudices, "today's reader may find the young Henry's statement of the case rather bland" and may feel that the father was bent on manipulating and frustrating his children, especially William. Yet in fact Henry's expression, as in saying that his father wanted them to be something "finer in short that being *that*, whatever it was, might consist of," is anything but bland in its elaborate verbal play. It is Lewis rather who risks blandness, or at least commits himself only to a cautious evenhandedness about the matter. He cites Howard Feinstein's claim in his psychobiography of William (*Becoming William James*, 1984) that Henry Sr. was determined to force William away from painting and into science; indeed that he went so far as to threaten suicide and feign a serious illness so as to prevail over the son's will. Lewis calls this a "fascinating but fundamental misreading," finding instead that William's father's paternal attitude was "greatly beneficial"; that it made for flexibility and led to a mode of thinking which drew on different disciplines ("art *and* chemistry, literature *and* electronics, religion *and* history") and different languages by way of describing a university which—in William's phrase—kept its doors and windows open. So despite the fact that, as Lewis admits, Henry Sr.'s attitudes may have had grave consequences in the physical and psychic troubles that began for William during his art study at Newport and would continue for years, the long view is a positive one. It is characteristic of Lewis' overall approach and the seamless style in which he conducts it that, at least for William and Henry, things should work out in time, in the end—that they come through as the heroic figures he rightly takes them to be. To keep this long view in mind means applying hindsight and a wait-and-see attitude when, at a particular moment in their careers, things look rather bad.

Lewis gives a very useful account of William of Albany's fortunes and how much of it Henry Sr. inherited. Since William was one of the two or three richest men in the country (his fortunes in the 1830s were said to have been second only to John Jacob Astor's), Henry Sr.'s share of the three-million-dollar estate (divided among nine children and three other legatees) figures by today's standard to have been something in excess of $300,000 a year before taxes. Both William and Henry Jr. were expected to be scrupulous in rendering accounts to their parents of their spending, in the days when they were travelling and trying to choose a career. Writing of the rupture with his grandfather's commercial brilliance, Henry Jr. boasted that "We were never in a single case, I think, for two generations, guilty of a stroke of business," and though this was not quite true, the point was just. What they did instead, Lewis points out, "was to displace the language and the motifs of the money world into other realms of discourse: into theology, philosophy, psychology, literature; and to

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entangle them with other energies of experience." William's talk in *Pragmatism* about the "cash value" of ideas and Henry's themes in *Portrait of a Lady* and *The Wings of the Dove* were only two examples of such displacement.

There has been a small fashion of referring to Henry Sr. as the "most interesting and complex of all the James family,"[3] but nothing Lewis says makes me want to put in my hours over *The Secret of Swedenborg* or *Substance and Shadow*. Howells noted about the former that it was a secret Mr. James had succeeded in keeping; while William, in one of his finest expressions of sardonic filial wit, designed a woodcut for the cover of the latter depicting a man flogging a dead horse. "Father's ideas," as Henry referred to them, didn't arouse much enthusiasm in the last century and have had no posthumous life. Still, Carlyle looked upon Henry Sr. as a confirmation of his (Carlyle's) observation that "a stammering man is never a worthless one," and as a writer, Henry Sr. is worth most when he is—as in his reminiscence of Carlyle—vividly particular.[4] But vividness and particularity get lost when, all too often, the subject is God or Society or Man.

I think it could be argued that the James who comes through least interestingly in Lewis' pages is The Master himself. Although all the familiar and important moments in Henry James's life are commented on and quoted from, they are not given much in the way of a new twist. Consider what the biographer makes of Henry's famous dream vision in which he pursues and routs a threatening visitant down the long hall of the Galerie d'Apollon in the Louvre. Edel treats it as a fable about the triumph of style, "the story of his art and his self-assertion in relation to his brother and the way in which he had conquered fear and family pressure." This seems harmless, if rather too abstract to be useful. Lewis tries to go further in linking William to the vision, saying that "one obvious identification of the fleeing figure though far from the only one, is brother William: and in his regard, the late-in-life dream may have been a revivifying of Henry's youthful intuition that, in any rivalry between William and himself, he, Henry would possess the power to triumph." May have been—and may not have been: take your pick. Again there is a blandness in the way Lewis slides over things, inviting us to become excited about a big connection, then cautiously backing away from it. A similar airlessness pervades what look to be important formulations about Henry's

[3] In his chapter on William James in *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, Madison, Wisconsin, 1989 (p. 60) Cornel West makes this curious claim.

[4] "Carlyle is the same old sausage, fizzing and sputtering in his own grease, only infinitely more unreconciled to the blessed Providence which guides human affairs," he wrote to Emerson from London in 1856. After *Shooting Niagra* was published, James called Carlyle "a palpable nuisance . . . If he holds to his present mouthing ways to the end, he will find no showman to match him on the other side for I hold Barnum to be a much more innocent personage." This is surely the right note.

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artistic temperament, his preference, for example, of Michelangelo's statue of Moses (in San Pietro in Vincoli) to Raphael's frescoes in the Vatican *stanze*. Henry admired the eloquence with which Michelangelo rejected "inaction"; Lewis says this is about James's ideal self and his choice of action over spectatorship:

> He was giving voice to his nascent belief that creativity involved risk, struggle, courage, adventure: in short, action. In his later formula, a work of art, literary or otherwise, constituted a "braving of difficulties" or it was nothing.

One doesn't disagree with this so much as question whether it really tells us anything about James the novelist. The interesting Raphael-Michelangelo comparison becomes less so when Lewis interprets it.

Since this book is conceived as a narrative rather than a series of "textual" commentaries, one isn't pushed to rethink Henry's achievement as a novelist. There are helpful suggestions tossed out, such as that the immense sense of loss in *The Bostonians* may be connected with the recent death of Henry Sr., or that *The Princess Casamassima*, in its rendering of teeming London, may be profitably compared with *Little Dorrit*. Lewis holds what, to my mind, is an inflated valuation of both *The American* and *Daisy Miller* calling the former "among the best of James's novels" (surely that cannot be the case) and the latter an "endlessly appealing and literarily brilliant tale" (it seems to me appealing but relatively lightweight, not at all in a class with the masterpiece of James's early career, *Washington Square*). I liked his saying that chapter 42 of *The Portrait of a Lady*, where James renders Isabel Archer's "meditative vigil" on her life with Osmond, "one of the best things ever written by an American novelist." But it seems to me less than news—though the sort of thing a "family narrative" encourages—to say that Osmond is "self incarnate, the embodiment of that egotism which Henry Senior regarded as the unpardonable spiritual sin." Superimposing "father's ideas" on the presumably independent life that a really substantial novel like *Portrait* displays, has the effect of muffling and diluting the particular energies of James's presentation of character. Similarly "The Pupil," about which F. W. Dupee many years ago wrote that "A kind of fraternal-homosexual affection unites the boy and the tutor," is treated by Lewis wholly as an instance of Henry's employing the scenic method in order to dramatize William James's "stream of thought," as described in his *Psychology*. Thus the story of Pemberton, the tutor, and his little charge, Morgan Moreen, as they scramble about Europe from lodging to lodging, is to be understood as a series (in William's phrase) of "flights and perchings." I suppose so, but to talk wholly in such terms is to ignore the heart of this strange tale.

It is perhaps Alice James who benefits most by being juxtaposed with other members of her family. Lewis pays ample tribute to Jean

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Strouse's biography and has no revisionist account of Alice to offer, but does quote poignantly sardonic entries from her diary, like this one from 1890: "Within the last year [Harry] has published *The Tragic Muse*, brought out *The American* and written a play, *Mrs. Vibert* . . . combined with William's *Psychology*, not a bad show for one family! especially if I get myself dead, the hardest job of all." When Henry, who was of all the brothers most attentive and sympathetic to Alice, inquired of a Dr. Baldwin whether his sister would die, the doctor replied "They sometimes do," to which Alice responded—"This is most cheering to all parties." In her sufferings Alice possessed the ambiguous gift of a piercing wit that makes her misfortunes easier to read about, unlike those misfortunes which dogged Wilky and Robertson, the two younger brothers. Although Lewis dutifully and painstakingly traces their sad careers, it takes a more intense James family follower than I to give them full attention.

William emerges most interestingly from this chronicle, partly no doubt because he has had good luck in the 1980s, being the recipient of three considerable biographical and critical studies.[5] But it may have also to do with the fact that we've been saturated with Henry through the hundreds (and hundreds) of books and essays that have appeared in this century since, in January 1918, Eliot and Pound more or less launched things with their tributes in *The Little Review*. Even though Lewis' portrait of William isn't challenging or tendentious (the way Feinstein's is), he gives us enough of the man's words in various relations—especially with his wife Alice—so as to make us imagine him. Speaking of a letter written by William to his parents after he has been acutely ill on the voyage to Brazil with Agassiz, Lewis points out how "the note of the comic or the wry . . . interpenetrates the miserable or the desperate." Such interpenetration occurs in James's later writings as well, giving them the pithy vigorousness so much admired; one thinks of a moment near the beginning of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* when, apologizing for the way he's going to be treating individual pathologies by classifying them and thus reducing their *sui generis* character, James suddenly changes the focus:

> Probably a crab would be filled with a sense of personal outrage if it could hear us class it without ado or apology as a crustacean, and thus dispose of it. "I am no such thing," it would say; "I am MYSELF, MYSELF alone."

[5] Besides the Howard Feinstein biography there is Jacques Barzun's admirable discussion of WJ's writings (in *A Stroll with William James*, New York, 1983). Mr. Barzun's book is the best introduction to James. Gerald E. Meyers' *William James: His Life and Thought* (1986) is painstaking, though dauntingly long.

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Such a perception might have occurred to Henry, but he would have tricked it out in much grandeur verbal finery, with huffings and puffings and humble apologies to the crustacean. Lewis is right, I think, to claim that for all Henry's justly-famed sensitivity, William was the more sensitive reader of poetry; the passages from Wordsworth and Whitman quoted in William's "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" testify to a more direct line to poetry than the "irredeemable proser" (as Henry called himself) was capable of.

"Paris was the most human city we had," muses Wyndham Lewis' Tarr. William James was the most human philosopher we had, and in case there was doubt, this book confirms it.[6] Committed to marriage and the family, he didn't much like to be around crying infants and was good at taking off for spiritual refreshment when things got complicated, i.e. noisy, in family quarters. When his son Henry was born in 1879, William fled to the coast of Maine where he was "instantly visited by the tenderest feelings for those he had left behind" (Lewis writes, I hope with some mordancy). On another occasion he was human enough to produce some bad though heartfelt prose-poetry to his wife about a remembered moment from their honeymoon in which Alice had "laughed with dilating nostrils at me! When shall I again kiss those nostrils?" But he did better than that when writing Alice (who was still at their summer home in Chocorua, New Hampshire) that the opening of term at Harvard was anticlimactic: "To prepare for the men is always rather inspiring." But to meet them was the reverse: "They always look so haphazard and finite and inferior"—those three adjectives, lined up, make a newly human perception about academic life.

I'm not as convinced as Lewis that William's finest moments as a writer occur when he's single-mindedly and "eloquently" composing paeans to the heroic life. At such moments the humor and wryness drop away, and the voice rings out loud and clear. Or at least inspirational, as in the passage—singled out for special admiration by Lewis—from the chapter on "Will" in the *Psychology* which celebrates the heroic man in a climactic summation:

> He can *stand* this Universe. He can meet it and keep up his faith in it in presence of those same features which lay his weaker brethren low . . . And thereby he becomes one of the masters and the lords

[6] It has recently been confirmed, even more convincingly, by the Library of America's 1987 volume of WJ's writings 1902-1910, with notes by Bruce Kuklick. Here, in 1379 pages, we are given *The Varieties of Religious Experience, Pragmatism, A Pluralistic Universe, The Meaning of Truth,* and *Some Problems of Philosophy*—plus a generous selection from James's later essays. One hopes that at some point the Library will give us a second volume containing the earlier WJ: *Principles of Psychology, The Will to Believe,* and essays from his pre-1902 years.

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> of life. He must be counted with henceforth: he forms part of the human destiny.

Lewis says that these surrounding sentences repay "reading slowly and savoringly." Yet compared to sentences in Emerson (one notes the allusion here in "lords of life") or in his Harvard contemporary, Santayana, James's sound single-minded, simple rather than clear (to invoke his own memorable distinction from "The Sentiment of Rationality"). Is it precious or jaded to suggest that the inspirational side of James has dated? Of course it all depends on your temperament, and I find myself less responsive to this appeal near the end of the *Psychology*, or to his defense of what he calls "over-belief" at the end of *Varieties*, than to the more mixed style that expresses an interpenetration of belief and skepticism, sincerity and irony, existential anguish and wry verbal wit. James, perhaps, as he lives in the poetry of his admiring pupil who never took a course with him at Harvard—Robert Frost. The James who was so unheroic as to declare in a letter to Henry, having read *The Wings of the Dove*, that it was "most *beautiful*" "in its way," then defined that way:

> You've reversed every traditional canon of story-telling (especially the fundamental one of *telling* the story, which you carefully avoid) and have created a new *genre littéraire* which I can't help thinking perverse, but in which you nevertheless *succeed* for I read with interest to the end (many pages, and innumerable sentences twice over to see what the dickens they could possibly mean) and all with unflagging curiosity to know what the upshot might become. It's very distingué in its way, there are touches unique and inimitable, but it's a "rum" way . . .

"At any rate it is your own," he concluded, urging Henry to keep sending along everything he wrote. It's been the habit to deplore William's comments about his brother's fiction as unperceptive, if not motivated by a nasty competitiveness—which William, on the occasion of refusing to join the American Academy (since Henry was already a member) certainly could show. But a response like the one just quoted comes from an attentive, candid, demanding, and, yes, human reader who has been thoroughly gotten to by his younger brother's impossible sentences. It's not in the least a "rum" critical way to behave, and it's one more example of the inexhaustible richness the remarkable Jameses hold for us.

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DAVID MASON

Fiction Chronicle

"A NOVEL SHOULDN'T BE LIKE A BICYCLE RACE," writes Milan Kundera, "but a feast of many courses."[1] This is an old idea, dating back at least to Fielding's Bill of Fare, but it remains an attractive and useful one. Kundera's new novel is a feast of ideas and associations; it's witty, insightful, and rarely dull. If I finished the book with the same disappointment I have felt over previous Kundera novels, if this feast left me longing for one important course it lacked, it nevertheless offered several substantial helpings of pleasure.

Kundera intends, I think, to disillusion us; he allows insight but thwarts deeper emotional responses, apparently out of a belief that such emotions are too conventional. His coldness is not entirely unattractive, but it is limiting in particular ways. Kundera plays his characters like barely-related notes in the chromatic scale (his novels even correspond to an occult numerology, seven sections each). Given this rather mechanical approach, it's a wonder how much sympathy he does manage to convey. In fact, Kundera turns out to be an old-fashioned moralist in post-modern guise, whose thesis is that our apprehension of earthly immortality—our desire to live on in the collective memory—is what motivates our various gestures. Perhaps he's right and we're all narcissists. However, my argument is not with his ideas but with the limitations of his technique. I was never deeply moved by this book, or outraged, or made to laugh out loud, only beguiled.

One of *Immortality*'s major characters is a sad, somewhat isolated woman named Agnes. Her problem: "How to live in a world with which you disagree." We watch Kundera invent Agnes in the opening pages—he almost makes the old metafictional conceit of the self-conscious author seem fresh. But Kundera is skeptical of individuality. Though he invents Agnes from an observed gesture, the gesture is not her own:

> If our planet has seen some eighty billion people, it is difficult to suppose that every individual has his or her own repertory of gestures. Arithmetically, it is simply impossible. Without the slightest doubt, there are far fewer gestures in the world than there are

[1] IMMORTALITY, by *Milan Kundera*. Trans. by *Peter Kussi*. Grove Weidenfeld. $21.95.

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> individuals. That finding leads us to a shocking conclusion: a gesture is more individual than an individual.

Of course his analysis is playful, but I longed for his characters to escape the confines of his theory—and in one brief, early scene, they did.

Agnes, we learn, was always the favorite of her father, a German (she was raised Swiss-French). He used to recite Goethe's poetry to her; the German lines come to represent an "unbearable nostalgia" and a secret connection to her father that Agnes never again finds with anyone else, including a lover named Rubens. When she recites Goethe along with her father as he is dying, the moment is unexpectedly touching. Kundera never lets it happen again.

Goethe turns out to be an important character in the novel. Paralleling the story of Agnes and her circle is a ruthlessly amusing historical fiction about Goethe's acquaintance, Bettina von Arnim, and her pursuit of earthly immortality. Kundera even imagines conversations in the afterlife between Goethe and Hemingway. Such scenes give the novel much of its philosophical comedy. Of several good epigrams, I particularly relished these two: ". . . nothing requires a greater effort of thought than arguments to justify the rule of nonthought" and "*I think therefore I am* is the statement of an intellectual who underrates toothaches."

Ivan Klíma is another Czech writer who works from a thesis.[2] Again the argument is plausible, but where Kundera's ideas are carried lightly, Klíma's become leaden and almost completely submerge his story. *Love and Garbage* was first published outside Czechoslovakia in 1986, and its images have the gray despairing textures of a country that had become increasingly like a Kafka novel. The protagonist is a writer who, like Klíma at that time, cannot publish in his own country, so he takes a job as a garbage collector and street sweeper. Because the writer can't decide between two women—he is so indecisive that he makes Hamlet look like a managerial prodigy—his personal life is a mess. The story is essentially about how he chooses kinds of self-imprisonment, isolation and silence. The rest of the novel is rumination, and no matter how brilliant much of the thinking is, it cannot compensate for an absence of dramatic scenes.

Garbage is Klíma's metaphor for our time. On both sides of what used to be called the Iron Curtain, garbage may be our most lasting legacy. Even language becomes trash:

> I recently read an article in an American weekly about how fourteen complete idiots incapable of speech had learned 'jerkish'. That was the name of a language of 225 words, developed in

[2] LOVE AND GARBAGE, by Ivan Klíma. Trans. by *Ewald Osers*. Alfred A. Knopf. $20.00.

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> Atlanta for mutual communications between humans and chimpanzees. . . . It occurred to me immediately that at last a language had been found in which the spirit of our age could speak, and because that language would spread rapidly from pole to pole, to the east and to the west, it would be the language of the future.

This is a fine passage, but the appropriateness of its ideas alone can't sustain a novel. Rather than explaining the world to us, great novels allow us the imaginative room to explain it for ourselves. These thesis-novels imply a mistrust of the ambiguity of stories.

A variation on this phenomenon is Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, which attempts to retell modern Indian history in the epic terms of The Mahabharata.[3] The novel is conceptually brilliant, but in execution it drags. All of its attractions are cerebral. There are delightful send-ups of Kipling, Forster, Paul Scott, Koestler and Rushdie. There are swatches of good light verse, particularly in a chapter corresponding to the teachings of the Gita. But as a narrative the book has two problems. The first needn't be crippling: we already know the story of Gandhi and the Nehru dynasty, and if you know anything about The Mahabharata you can predict most of the rest. Dritarashtra becomes Nehru, Duryodhani is Indira Gandhi; it's mostly a game of fill in the blanks. The second problem is more important: though Tharoor is clearly very bright and talented, his mock-epic style never really develops vital characters. The novel needs an illusionist with a Nabokovian touch, and instead we've got an unusually witty political analyst. "India without politics," he writes ominously, "would be like Atlantis without water."

More than any of the writers under review here, Buchi Emecheta has been a polemicist. Where Kundera, Klíma and Tharoor are sophisticated intellectuals, Emecheta is awkward and enraged. She writes blatantly feminist novels about the subjugation of women, particularly those from her native Nigeria. Her stories are like the paintings of someone who has never learned the conventions of perspective and composition; she preaches more often (and far less eloquently) than Dickens, and has a bad habit of explaining her ironies until they cease to exist. Her popularity among some academic critics has more to do with the politics of cultural diversity than with literary artistry. But in spite of its awkwardness, her fiction is difficult to dismiss, and her latest novel manages new material in affecting ways.[4]

For the first time in Emecheta's work, Nigerians are on the perpiphery; she writes about a Jamaican family living in London. The eldest daughter, Gwendolen (called June-June because no one can

[3] THE GREAT INDIAN NOVEL, by *Shashi Tharoor*. Arcade Publishing/Little, Brown. $19.95.

[4] THE FAMILY, by *Buchi Emecheta*. George Braziller. $8.95p.

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pronounce her given name), suffers sexual abuse at the hands of two men, one of them her father. Her inability to communicate her suffering and the confusion it causes (cultural as well as personal) results in the near-destruction of her family. This is a post-colonial *Hard Times*, a novel about education and how the lack of it contributes to social injustice. The straightforward narrative and the veracity of certain details give the book as much power as anything Emecheta has done. In this world people are old when they reach their late thirties. But *The Family* is severely weakened by the author's heavy-handedness, as when Gwendolen explains the meaning of her illegitimate daughter's name: "Iyamide means 'My mother is here'. It's symbolic. . . . it means everything I ever wanted, warmth, security, comfort, is all here in a female form." This kind of improbable resolution, which also spoiled Emecheta's *Double Yoke*, is typical of a novelist whose message is so urgent that she cannot take the time to discover its perfect form.

Two of the novels that came my way are set in Africa, and both use that continent as an exotic backdrop for scenes of Hollywood sex and violence. William Boyd's *Brazzaville Beach* is an entertaining and ultimately hollow book.[5] It opens with an ethologist named Hope Clearwater living "on the edge of Africa," enigmatically recovering from two disasters in her life, two narrative strands that make up the bulk of the novel. In England she was married to an eccentric mathematician who was driven mad by his theoretical pursuits, and in Africa her Jane Goodallish studies of chimpanzee behavior have led to startling discoveries (chimps are as brutal as humans) and a battle of scientific wills. The novel has all the ingredients of a meditation on culture and aggression. But, aside from some graphic scenes among the chimps, Boyd never gets very deeply into his subject because he never gets deeply into Hope's character. She's so stoic and capable that the disasters of her life don't really get to her; in the end, since she keeps working for the rival scientist even in the wake of their climactic battle, these events seem to have no effect upon her life at all.

Boyd can write deft comedy, and in Dr. Amilcar, a rebel whose commando unit comprises a school's volleyball team, he has created a wonderful comic character. But the violent scene in which he dispatches of Amilcar, as improbable as a B-movie shoot-out, suggests that Boyd doesn't always know his own strengths as a novelist.

The first novel by Canadian poet Barry Callaghan also mistakes fireworks for character development.[6] Adam Waters spends much of the book on a quest for his childhood sweetheart, Gabrielle O'Leary, who nurses lepers somewhere in "darkest" Africa. Pages of this novel are devoted to their past sexual acts, but none convinces me of the

[5] BRAZZAVILLE BEACH, by *William Boyd*. William Morrow. $21.00.

[6] THE WAY THE ANGEL SPREADS HER WINGS, by *Barry Callaghan*. Ontario Review Press. $22.50.

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kind of love that Callaghan apparently intends to convey. Waters is a man trying to recapture his ruined past, and the past is where the real heart of this novel keeps beating. His wandering, jazz-playing father and his bitter mother, not to mention their rough, ethnically mixed neighborhood, are far more engaging than the empty symbolic figures of Adam and Gabrielle as adults. We get little sense of Adam as a working photojournalist (though he spends many pages pinned down in a revolutionary firefight), and this Africa is nothing more than a symbol of historical chaos. The Canadian scenes, some of them beautifully written, are full of the textures of specific lives; the African ones could have been set anyplace with armed fanatics.

International intrigue and gunplay are the weakest elements in Don DeLillo's new novel as well, but DeLillo is a fine storyteller who knows how to balance complex characters and vivid ideas.[7] He has the best ear for comic dialogue of any recent American writer I know, and his traditionally-plotted novels have a souped-up, contemporary feel to them. *Mao II* is literary pulp fiction, and taken as such it is very rewarding.

Like Kundera, DeLillo is a stern critic of modern life, particularly our culture of the image. Unless you've sworn off book reviews for the last six months you already know DeLillo's thesis, which is formulated by his novelist character, Bill Gray:

> Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated.

And later:

> Beckett is the last writer to shape the way we think and see. After him, the major work involves midair explosions and crumbled buildings. This is the new tragic narrative.

It's an idea you can almost believe when you watch CNN late at night, and tongues are sure to wag about it at the MLA, but it relies upon a misguided sense of literature's role in any historical period. Novels, unlike brainwashing and propaganda, don't directly alter consciousness; they illuminate it. When DeLillo's terrorists kidnap a Swiss poet and hold him hostage, his thesis crumbles, both because the poet never comes alive as a character and because we've never seen any poet taken so seriously in the real world.

On the other hand, DeLillo's novelist, Bill Gray, is believably alive. Like J.D. Salinger and Thomas Pynchon (who provides a blurb for

[7] MAO II, by *Don DeLillo*. Viking. $19.95.

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this book), Gray has become a cult figure partly by living in seclusion and not publishing, though he obsessively revises his current work. "The image world is corrupt," he says, but he has invited a globe-trotting photographer to take his portrait; without a public identity he can't quite believe in his private one. Bill is the willing prisoner of his most devoted fan, a literary fanatic named Scott, whose girlfriend is a lapsed Moonie; the two young people are dedicated to maintaining the guru-writer. DeLillo has set up a sequence of cults, subcults and power structures to show us how individual will and identity are subsumed by groups. "The future belongs to crowds," he writes; his novel contains several frightening photographs as cases in point: a mass wedding in a stadium, soccer fans crushed against a fence. He takes his title from a sequence of Warhol images, suggesting crowds of meaningless reproductions. Bill Gray becomes a sort of Graham Greene hero, an older man seeking redemption for a botched life by clinging to his shred of integrity, but his disappearance is contrived. The novel is more a bicycle race than a feast.

Where DeLillo's novel is deliberately up-to-date, M.S. Power's story of Irish villagers is almost without any historical context at all.[8] Despite this weakness and a brevity that is too tightly controlled, *Crucible of Fools* resonates with the force of poetry. It's the most chilling book in this group, a minor but near-perfect work of art.

The story is simple enough. A man named Dan Loftus endures a series of Job-like losses that drive him mad, and his madness is encouraged and strengthened by the brutality of his community. Power orchestrates the story so that each stage of Dan's decline is more shocking than the last; I was actually appalled and moved by this man's deterioration. Here is a passage that comes just after his possessions have been auctioned off:

> They had taken his bed and sold it, blankets and all, although they had dumped his filthy sheets in one corner and thrown the hard pillow on top of them. The bed old Mrs. Ballerman had died in, the one Deirdre had taken to after Sergei's death, was still there, but Dan didn't fancy it. He liked the quilt on it though—pretty blues and yellows and pinks and greens—so he grabbed that and trundled downstairs. He spread the quilt in front of the range and lay down on it, curling himself up in front of the hearth like a great hound, and in his mind he heard the wood crackle in the unlit range.

That last sentence is one of the earliest indications we have that Dan is losing his mind. He is finally reduced to gruesome savagery, but the book touches me because Power trusts his story. There is more of the

[8] CRUCIBLE OF FOOLS, by *M.S. Power*. Viking. $18.95.

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epic and the myth in this little tale than in any other book under review here.

Power's novel is also unexpectedly funny, but the novel that made me laugh aloud and gave me the greatest pleasure was *Glad Rags*, by MacDonald Harris.[9] It's the sort of feast Kundera describes but doesn't quite deliver; in fact, it's full of wonderful meals detailed with a kind of controlled verbal inebriation. On the face of it, Harris has chosen the thinnest old story possible; a fifty-eight-year-old retired publisher, Ben Gavilan, falls in love with a harpsichordist named Cecilia who is less than half his age. But Harris captures the milieu and inner life of his characters with such vivid precision that the story seems wholly new. Moreover, he understands that the real story begins when their relationship shifts from a remote Californian resort to a less rarefied atmosphere; Gavilan introduces Cecilia to his witty, dissolute friends in Santa Barbara, and the novel opens up into delicious satirical scenes as good as Waugh's or Anthony Powell's.

I can't quote large chunks of Harris' galloping dialogue, so I'll offer a portion of one of Gavilan's more telling meditations:

> He still *felt* the same as he felt when he was a student at Tufts; he had the same emotions, the same desires and thoughts. But now he was evidently going to a costume party and someone had made him up as himself at fifty-eight, pencilling in wrinkles, dusting the temples with gray powder, and deepening the cave-like shadows around the eyes. He was wearing a mask of himself as an old man. Attached to this dying animal, the cylindrical scrap of flesh at the groin was a pitiful parody, resembling an appliance he had bought at a sex shop to deceive a younger woman. It hung in his papery loins no larger than a man's thumb, shrunken by the chill of the bathroom.
>
> *She must never see this*, he told himself.

As this passage suggests, the book's tone shifts subtly. Its settings also shift—from California to Europe and back again—so we can see Gavilan's struggles to adapt his private relationship to a hilarious series of public challenges. Why has he ignored a woman his own age for so many years and taken up the untenable love of Cecilia? Is it really untenable? Without diminishing the novel's pace, Harris carefully uncovers the truth of Gavilan's motives; if that truth is rather expected, Harris still makes it durable and moving. His Gavilan is a paradox, a fastidious epicurean who in the end becomes a shrewd manipulator of other people. Harris' novel, on the other hand, doesn't seem manipulative at all. It reveals its truth with great humor and imaginative subtlety. It trusts its own story.

[9] GLAD RAGS, by *MacDonald Harris*. Story Line Press. $21.95.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

LOUIS SIMPSON's most recent book of poems is *In the Room We Share* (Paragon House). "The Vigil" is a chapter in a forthcoming book of memoirs. . . . JOHN VAN KIRK* has worked as a carpenter, a bartender, a sailor, and a pilot. This spring he will be an Artist in Residence at Villa Montalvo, in California. "Newark Job" is his first published story. . . . JOHN FREDERICK NIMS had two books of poetry published in 1990: *The Six-Cornered Snowflake* and *Zany in Denim.* Earlier this year he was the recipient of the Aiken Taylor Award for Modern American Poetry. . . . PHILIP DACEY's most recent book is *Night Shift at the Crucifix Factory* (U. of Iowa Press). . . . EMILY GROSHOLZ's third book of poetry, *Sailboat, Flower, Child,* will be published by Johns Hopkins University Press in the spring of 1992. . . . JOHN HOLLOWAY recently completed a second volume of autobiography, sequel to *A London Childhood.* . . . ROBERT PHILLIPS is author of five books of poetry, including *Personal Accounts: New & Selected Poems, 1966–86,* for which he received an Award in Literature from the American Academy & Institute of Arts & Letters. He is Director of the Creative Writing Program and Professor of English at the University of Houston.

ALLEN HOEY is an associate professor in the Department of Language and Literature at Bucks County Community College. He is the author of *A Fire in the Cold House of Being,* published by the Walt Whitman Center. . . . SARAH M. BROWNSBERGER* has been employed as a translator and teacher of Icelandic. . . . TED KOOSER* is a life insurance executive in Nebraska. He has two collections of poetry in print from the University of Pittsburgh Press, including *Sure Signs.* . . . RICHARD HORNBY has just become chairman of the Theatre Department at the University of California, Riverside. He is author of the forthcoming *The End of Acting* (Theatre Applause Books). . . . BERT CARDULLO's translation of Heinrich von Kleist's *The Broken Pitcher* was produced at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, last fall. . . . HAROLD FROMM is the author most recently of *Academic Capitalism and Literary Value* (University of Georgia Press). . . . A selection of CLARA CLAIBORNE PARK's essays, *Rejoining the Common Reader,* has recently been published by Northwestern University Press. . . . Last spring ROBERT SCHULTZ was artist-in-residence at Luther College under a grant from the Joyce Foundation to begin a novel tentatively entitled *The Madhouse Nudes.* . . . ANDREW HUDGINS teaches at the University of Cincinnati. His book of poems, *The Never-Ending* (Houghton Mifflin), is one of the finalists for the National Book Award. . . . DAVID MASON is the author of *The Buried Houses* (Story Line Press).

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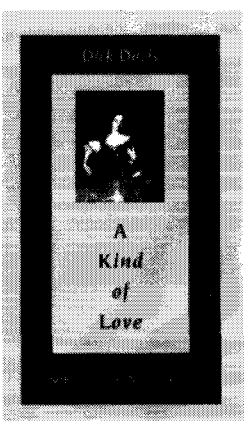

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IN THIS ISSUE:

Kinvara's claim to fame as far as most people are concerned, however, is not its architectural history and antiquarian associations, but rather its pubs. A village population of roughly 500 contrives, with stout contributions from the residents of outlying areas, to support a total of nine pubs including the Ould Plaid Shawl. Irish people don't seem to enjoy drinking at home. Drinking means drinking at the pub. And like everything else in Ireland, drinking at the pub involves conversation.

—Richard Tillinghast, "Letter from Galway," p. 534.

You come to a place casually and have no liking for it . . . you may even dislike it. But time passes and one day you realize that much of your life has been spent there. Your connection with the place is like Swann's with Odette: "To think that I've wasted years of my life, that I've longed to die, that I've experienced my greatest love, for a woman who didn't appeal to me, who wasn't even my type!"

—Louis Simpson, "The Vigil," p. 543.

Cruelty, after all, is not just the Ivan-the-Terrible type anecdote, an individual's personal taste for sadism. That's ugly, of course, but how many victims can one person process in a day? Personal cruelty begins to count precisely when its author sets up the impersonal mechanisms that enable many people to be killed, and then keeps a loving eye on those mechanisms all the time. Surely Sinyavsky knows this, but he persists in his belief that "by nature Lenin was not an evil person."

—Caryl Emerson, "Soviet Civilization: Its Discontents, Disasters, Residual Fascinations," p. 574.

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